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Indian Literature

SAHITYA AKADEMI'S BI-MONTHLY JOURNAL

HIGHLIGHTS:

Interview: Sudhanshu Chaturvedi

Second Tradition: Karaikkal Ammaiyar

Literary Criticism: Humayun Kabir's *Men and Rivers*



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With the present issue, *Indian Literature* completes fifty years of its publication. It was in October 1957 that the first issue of the then half-yearly journal came out. During these fifty years, *Indian Literature* has witnessed major literary trends that held sway in the regional language literatures and Indian English—broadly, it has borne the imprint of their evolution into modernist and post-modernist phases. The works of thousands of Indian writers including those of all-time greats have appeared in its pages. It has carried works expressing the surge of nationalism, freedom, and coming of age of Indian democracy and polity. It is with a great sense of pride and fulfillment that we at *Indian Literature* greet you, dear readers, on this historic occasion, which occurs but once in the lives of most of us who are associated with this journal now, as readers, writers or as its staff. As part of its golden jubilee celebrations, a translation competition has been announced in the genres of poetry, fiction and oral literature from all Indian language literatures into English. Advertisements in this regard have appeared in leading national dailies covering all regions of the country. The prize-winning entries and the runners up will be published in the forthcoming issues of *Indian Literature* on a priority basis.

It will be stating the obvious when I say that *Indian Literature* owes its very existence to translation. Indeed, a major part of Sahitya Akademi's mission is all about translation. Sahitya Akademi, from its very inception, has almost single-handedly managed English translation of great literary works from different languages of India until about a couple of decades ago, during a time when big-time publishers would not touch translation with a bargepole—of course, with the exception of literary editors like Mini Krishnan, pioneering lone crusaders who managed to convince their company top brass to adopt translation projects. Gradually, publishing houses run by voluntary organizations began to show interest in translation; soon, multinationals picked it up and now it has become quite fashionable, nay, it is in high demand. Indian Literature in English Translation has now grown into a distinct body of literature which has begun to be prescribed in the syllabi of graduate and post-graduate English programmes in several prestigious universities across the country. And, Sahitya Akademi still remains the biggest publisher and promoter of translated literary works.

Apart from the massive reception through translation from the modern classics of English and major European languages, most of the Indian regional languages had gained from the fruits of the great Bengal renaissance too. It is well-known that the early development of these literatures in the modern phase, mainly in the genre of fiction, owes also a great deal to the translations of the works of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyaya and others, and later, to those of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Tarasankar Bandyopadhyaya, Manik Bandyopadhyaya and others, and of course, to the works of Rabindranath Tagore spanning the entire twentieth century and up to the present. Translations among other major Indian languages followed suit—amongst the various languages in the different regions, and between next-door neighbours. Also, between far-flung neighbours, for example, between Marathi and Bengali, Malayalam and Oriya etc. A major part of these activities during the last half-century had taken place under the auspices of the Sahitya Akademi, since books that win Akademi awards in a particular language are entitled to be translated and published in all other Indian languages, through the Akademi. Knitting together a pan-Indian literary and cultural sensibility was silently taking place thus, over the years.

It is quite natural then for the Akademi to celebrate translation annually. Come August, it is the translation festival season in the Akademi. For the last few years, this festival has been taken out of Delhi, as part of spreading out important activities of the Akademi to other parts of the country. This year, the Translation Prize and Bhasha Samman presentation ceremony has been held in Hyderabad. It is doubtful whether another festival of such magnitude, involving 24 major languages and several minority languages of India, is organized by any other literary agency in the country.

While talking about translation, Sudhanshu Chaturvedi, a unique personality in establishing linkages between the north and the south through translation both ways—from Malayalam to Hindi and Hindi to Malayalam—comes in. In an interview with the Akademi's Deputy Secretary, Brajendra Tripathi, excerpts of which we publish in this issue, Sudhanshu Chaturvedi describes how he became the ambassador of Hindi in Kerala and, in the process, became the pride of Malayalam, acquiring, as he says, the sobriquet *Malayalattinte maanasaputran* (which, in a loose translation, means 'the fond son of Malayalam's sensibility'), by translating modern classics like Kumaran Asan's *Chintaavishtayaaya Sita* (Sita Lost in Mournful Thoughts), and novels of P. Kesava Dev and others into Hindi, classical Sanskrit works of Bhasa and Kalidasa and major Hindi works into Malayalam and by writing original works in that language. One has heard of Joseph

Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, Josip Brodsky and others writing in English and gaining acclaim, much more than for their writings in their mother tongues, or Samuel Beckett, an Irish writer, getting the Nobel Prize for his works in French...or, of our own bilingual writers like Arun Kolatkar of English/Marathi and Kamala Das/Madhavikkutty of English/Malayalam, getting prestigious awards for their writings in English and their respective mother tongues. Though not so much acclaimed, Sudhanshu Chaturvedi learned Malayalam, wrote a book in that language and won the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award for it! Interesting bridge-building between the north and the south, between Hindi and Malayalam, indeed!

K.Ayyappa Paniker was a path-breaking poet, critic, a patron of translation and an internationally known scholar, academic and educator, who is hailed as the father of modernist Malayalam poetry. The books he edited for Sahitya Akademi *Medieval Indian Literature* (in 4 vols.), *Making of Indian Literature* (now released in an impressive revised edition), *Indian English Literature Since Independence* and *Modern Indian Poetry in English* are monuments to his memory. His first death anniversary falls on 23 August. *Samyuktha*, an eminent journal of women's studies published from Thiruvananthapuram, commemorates it in a special way—carrying reminiscences and assessments of him by peers, admirers and students, as well as his own works in translation. The "Select Bibliography" of his primary works appended at the end is in fact the most comprehensive I have ever come across. I wish to draw the kind attention of all our readers to this special number of *Samyuktha*. Another noteworthy event in memory of Ayyappa Paniker was the three-day World Poets' Meet, organised by Krutya Foundation at Kumaran Asan National Cultural Institute, Thiruvananthapuram. This Meet was special in that fifty poets from different parts of the country and the world—from Belgium, Austria, Hong Kong, Korea, Ireland, Croatia, Italy, Germany and many others—participated in the event at their own expense and exchanged views on current poetic expressions in their cultures. Perpetuating Paniker's memory, The Ayyappa Paniker Foundation has also been formed.

Humayun Kabir's *Men and Rivers* is the first novel I ever read—in Malayalam translation, at around the age of ten or eleven. Even now I remember the rivalry between the characters Nazu Mia and Azhgar Mia and the recurring theme of the fight against elemental fury that marks the narrative. Although I had read *The King of the Golden River*, *Gulistan* etc., also in Malayalam translation, soon after, but I do not remember anything about them beyond the titles. When I saw an essay which analysed this novel, I somehow had a kind of precognition about 'beginnings'. Hence, this essay has become part of our "Literary Criticism" section.

What is wonderful about our folk traditions is that almost all of them have their own versions of the epics—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. We carry an essay identifying the 'Ramain' in its several folk versions in the myriad valleys of Himachal Pradesh.

The bhakti tradition has acted as the connector between the classical tradition and the folk tradition. The essence of the great epics and spiritual universals were presented before the common folks through the crystal-clear creations of our incomparable devotional poets, who, in the process, pioneered the evolution of whole new literatures. Usually, bhakti takes on the tone of sweet importunity, unbearable pangs of pain at separation and a beloved's pranks or love-quarrels. But Karaikkal Ammaiyar's *Ten Verses on Tiruvaalangad*, translated from classical Tamil by H.S.Shiva Prakash, presents a different form of bhakti—that of the macabre, the fierce—through which Lord Shiva is approached. The article by the translator throws light on the life of the poet and the *Verses*.

Read on....

A.J. Thomas
Editor

Anjali Kulkarni

Reality

Every morning
I lock the door
and come out of this house
with thorough makeup,
perfumes sprayed upon
my neat, decent dress.

The locked door
stares at my smart countenance—
minutes ago
it had experienced
along with me
terrible despair
fits of anger and anguish
violent rays and lots more.

I entrust all these feelings
in the safe custody of the locked door
and go out on work
with pseudo-confindence
wearing an outlook
of fake pleasantries.

Like a streched spring
I remain humble
and behave nicely
to every one around.

By the evening
I am exhausted
with the game of niceties
I come home drudged and tired.

The door is awaiting my comeback
It hands over back to me
All my sorrows and solace.

Behind the door
I once again
live real life
without any makeup.....

Translated from Marathi by Narendra Bodke

Come on Comrade!

Like a fierce he-cat
eats its own progeny
The revolution has devoured
its legendary outcome
Comrade, your Communism
has been burried alongwith
your beautiful dreams
you are still caressing
the dead body of the revolution.

It's a time-tested truth
the change is inevitable
It's fracturous to spread arms
around a carcass

Why don't you accept the fact?
This corpse does not contain
you, neither your revolution
or your dreams?

At least now,
come out of this dead-end
Breath freedom
behold the blue sky
stretched all around you....

Translated from Marathi by Narendra Bodke

City

How crazily crowded is this city
the evenings illuminated
with intoxicating comforts
the wealth is over-flowing
through the wide streets
wasted eatables, oxyrich water bottles,
Traffic jams, the smoke
excreted by four wheelers
through the deafening noise
of a buzz of activities

The city is dancing
with fits of vigour
Right now it's so tired
like a child playing crazily
throughout the day

I feel like embracing this child
I feel like singing a lullaby to it
and create solace for it

Will my lullaby reach the
deaf ears of this crowded city?

Translated from Marathi by Narendra Bodke

Fatima

When fatima received
a kick on her stomach
and her mother tried to intervene
her husband uttered adamantly
'I'll thrash her
after all she is my wife...'
on the verge of unconsciousness
a panorama appeared
from her deep memories....
The scene of the honeymoon night
while enfolding her in an embrace
the husband had whispered–
"You are my life, darling"

It was a long journey
from being his 'life'
and now only wife.

The pains in her stomach
grew intense
while collapsing in the deep
valley of unconsciousness
the utter darkness was
wailing in her ears
Alas Fatima!

Translated from Marathi by Narendra Bodke

Toy of Words

How meagrely we express
through the moments of life
hence this toy of words!
Sometimes you just look at it, amazed
sometimes catch hold of it
with child-like anxiety.

You can break this toy
look at every part of it
you can touch it with eyes closed
you can just put it in mouth
and taste it.

There are many ways
of knowing this toy
many, many ways indeed
to understand it.

You can't really know
the whole of it
It's like a mirage
in a desert.
The more you know
about the toy of words
the more difficult it becomes
to capture it in words

Translated from Marathi by Narendra Bodke



Anvar Ali

Don't be Angry

Don't be angry.

Last night
I gave a kiss to the love of ours
that we buried
before it budded into a boy or a girl,
in between two trace-lines
closer to the life-line
in the middle of your left palm

You didn't know that

It asked: 'For what?
For bringing me up privileged in past life?
Or to be orphaned in streets in the next?'

"No": I replied.
"You are a pain
that befell me
and her who wasn't fated to bear you

for tearing away from each other
and going to get dried up
on the clotheslines of different homes

that evening
when rain soaked this life,
just before twilight suspended
the forlorn trees

upside down from the earth to the nether-world,
with just the rumble of a *Lambretta*
that passed us by,
our sole witness"

It smiled
got up
and came with me
wearing the kiss I gave

Don't be angry
avenge me tonight
unbeknown to me.

Translated from Malayalam by Bindu Krishnan

The Night I Read Tsvetaeva

(To your sojourn and to our poetry nights on the banks of River Nila)

The room upstairs
and the moon at the window;
we are reading
Marina Tsvetaeva

Can you hear?

I've adjusted
the dwarf moon
towards your window
that lags behind several hours

Now,
O, prism,
can you hear
the broken image
the moonlight paints?

Marina Tsvetaeva: Russian poet; hanged herself in 1941

Though thrown and shattered

Verse of hers
in my throat
slim as the waning *Nila*:
'We have grown into one'*

Can you see?

Translated from Malayalam by T.P Rajeevan

A Yaksha in Aryavarta[1]

Has *Umma*[2] called
scooping up light
and splattering it on the rolling bit of cloud?

"Hey, don't you have to catch *Venaad*[3]
get up, quick!"

Springing awake, drizzling at her the blame
"Oh, it's late, and yet
you didn't call me earlier,"
it's *galis*[4] in front, like smoke rising from
the *chulas*[5] whom fire gnaws at;
'Ram, Ram', the desert winds...
what a dream, this abode!

Stretched the limbs on the balcony
like a midrib on a palm-frond, for a moment, then ceased;
the ill-omens emerged: *Venaad* may now be
rowing across the Perumon[6] bridge.
The sun, the wheezing old man, donning a white dhoti,
may be rising at the end of
our *Aamayizhanchaan*[7] Canal;
who knows for sure?

---

* 'We have grown into one' – A line from Tsvetaeva's 'Poem of The End', a love poem with seven parts which contextualise the moment that two lovers separate for ever.

Who knows why
the winds shut these dense clouds
in midnight's cellar and made off?
Is it to soak the meat of dawn
the sun has cut, out of time?
Is it to wash away
the revolting red dewlaps, throats
in the pitch-black Yamuna[8]?
Is it to irrigate
their ploughed up screams,
the shadow-fields?

'Who should know?'
The broom spread its thousand tips of heat;
a drop of star, hit by those obscenities,
shuddered and dropped down;
the poor thing had slept on
almost out of depths...!
Her wetness over my forehead,
the coolness, the warm breath;
eyelids closed....

Sunshine clothes are brushing...
Is there a heavy rush in the train?
Has it passed Tiruvalla station?
Are we nearing Kottayam[9] ?

"*Aao, aao, paani tanki aagayii,*"[10]
someone howled in Hindi.
Are they the fear-civet-trains that lie waiting
at the contra-track like grand *Nagari*[11] scripts?
No, those are the rented tongues of the rootless,
gaavs[12], powder magazines that rose
mating in sticky blood surges...
the open wounds, doors that the dreadlocks, cables,
sew up; the netherworlds of mob that ooze from them—

Bodies on which the half-saris of sweat burn,
tender ones that scatter like water-sparks
the last blazing of oldies, heaving futile sighs
flies of lust rising, churning up pyres

claws of thirst, fever of love,
bullocks roaming around *dhabas*[13] returning,
cow-beauties throwing eye magic at them,
calves slipping on their dung-sandals
dogs sleeping at their boundaries, doves
plucking the street's grey hairs;
at a distance a flock of sparrows
shaking the thicket of rust, shrieking
'drinking water...'

Has the rain ceased?
How hot, smelly this day-meat!
Is the train held up at Vaikom Road?
Is it the shouting of a newspaper boy,
'The Sea of *Karkkidakam*,'[14] or the roar of a wind?
Is it by swimming across the backwaters
that the wind approaches?
No, it's coming drilling this cooler.

Sat simply, leaning against the wall,
driving out the grimness of draught.
Behind the tower of corpses,
the sun grimaced and blazed.
This is a voyage across
the waters of a mirage.
Consciousness,
mind's meat
its moisture dried up.
The chest is summer,
the firewood, self-pride
the invasion of sandstorms
the migration of the benumbed....
Umma maybe wet, weeping, and laughing;
the *Aamayizhanchaan* Canal maybe
overflowing, spreading around.

The monsoon rain-train
is descending beyond Piravom Road
Innumerable furrows, swamps, islands
Watery terrains, their nerves...

nerves are multiplying in the incessant flow
The flocks of nomadic clouds are
being herded with the whiplash-lightning
by the winds mounted on the Western Ghats
Wavelets cut through with the Axe[15]
are beckoning
The Ocean of Tunchat chants a hymn,
inviting to dive deep into the Fishy depths[16]
The well of Poontaanam, to draw the pure waters
to make the *Ajnaanappaana*[17] full till it brims over
The Kunchan rivers dancing *Tullals*,[18]
are inviting, to plough up the five *tinas*...[19]

"It's Shoranur. Get down, quick."
Did *Umma* call, shaking my dream?
No, it's a tender throat,
"*Tanki jaa rahi saab*![20]"
In the open mouth, a star-drop
the poison *Kaakolam*[21]
'*Paani naa lena, kya*'? [22]

Translated from Malayalam by A.J.Thomas *and the* Poet

Translators' Note

This poem is written with direct reference to *Meghadootam* of Kalidasa. The tradition of *Sandesha kavya* or a message-poem, in which a forlorn lover sends his love-message to his lady-love through some non-human agent like a cloud, a peacock, etc., in Indian literatures, began with this poem, in which a Yaksha or a demi-god, whom his lord and employer, Kubera, the God of Wealth, banished from his court, because he didn't pay enough attention to his duties, as he was newly-married and was day-dreaming about the happiness he enjoyed in the company of his wife, the Yakshi. He was banished to Ramagiri, outside Aryavarta, or the region where Aryas spread upon migration to India. The protagonist of the present poem is however banished into Aryavarta (to Delhi)—it is banishment nevertheless, as he has parted from his beloved people and milieu. The poem is conceived, as the protagonist wakes up from his night's sleep on the open balcony of a small house in an 'urban' village of Delhi, with its sights and sounds, smells and ambience....

Notes

1 *Aryavarta*, generally North India, now here meant to be Delhi.

2 *Umma*, is 'Mother', the kinship term generally used in the Muslim community.

3 *Venaad* is an Express day-train that begins from Trivandrum, the capital city of Kerala, and terminates at Shoranur, a northern town.

4 *Gali is* a common word used in North India for narrow street or lane between two rows of houses or buildings in an urban village, or an ancient part of the city.

5 *Chula* is the indigenous oven on which the poor boil their morning tea and cook their humble meals.

6 *Perumon Bridge* is a railway bridge across the arm of the Asthamudi Lake in south Kerala, notorious because of one of the worst train accidents in the history of Indian Railways.

7 *Amayizhanchan Canal* is a canal in Trivandrum, near the residence of the poet.

8 *Yamuna* is the river with dark waters (indicating depth) celebrated in the Krishna story. During Krishna's childhood, this river was polluted by the poison of a mythical serpent, Kaliya, which affected the people, cattle and even vegetation— a grim prophecy of what was to come in the present times in the form of environmental pollution. Yamuna that flows through Delhi remains one of the most polluted rivers in the world, its waters pitch black, in spite of the many 'Save Yamuna' campaigns.

9 *Tiruvalla*, *Kottayam*, *Piravom Road*, *Vaikom Road* etc., are railways stations that the *Venaad Express* passes through

10 *Aao, aao paani tanki aa gayi"* in Hindi means, "come, come, the water tanker has arrived..."

11 *Nagari* script or the Devanagari script is the one used by many a north Indian languages. Originally used to write the Sanskrit language, this script is an ancient one, which has been famously described by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, as resembling clothes hung from a clothesline to dry. It also resembles a train made up of inter-linked oblongs of bogies.

12 *gaav*: literally means a village; here, it is an urban village of Delhi.

13 *Dhaba* is a traditional restaurant with an open kitchen, meant for the common people, found in cities, towns and villages alike, particularly in the Indo-Gangetic plains.

14 *Karkkidakam* is the monsoon month that corresponds to the month of *Ashadha*, the time of action of *Meghadootam*..

15 The Axe which cuts the Wavelets— is a direct reference to the legend of Parasuraman creating Kerala, by hurling his battle-axe from Gokarnam in the north to Kanyakumari in the south. The land between these two points is believed to have emerged from the sea, forming Kerala. The reference to 'Wavelets' reminds one of the wave-like metre (*Tarangini*), using which the Niranam poets of the Kannassa family composed their *Ramayanam* and *Mahabharatam*, a good two centuries before Tunchat Ezhuttachan, the Father of Malayalam Poetry, composed his *Ramayanam* and *Mahabharatam Kilippaattu*, undoubtedly influenced by the existing models.

16- *The Ocean of Tunchat...Fishy depths*: Reference to the ocean-like poetic world

of Tunchat Ezhuttachan and his *Bhaagavata* tradition (the Fishy depths referring to the first, and by implication, to the entire ten, Incarnations of Vishnu).

17 *The well of Poontaanam*...the *Ajnaanappaana*: Poontanam Namboodiri was the great poet after Ezhuttachan in the movement of Devotional Poetry. *Jnaanappaana*, his greatest work, as précise and full as a well, means the "Vessel of Wisdom"; *Ajnaanappaana* would mean the "Vessel empty of wisdom" that, when it is filled till it brims over, becomes *Jnaanappaana*

18 *Kunchan rivers...Tullals* : Kunchan Nambiar is a great Malayalam poet of the 18th century, who, through the satirical narration of the socio-cultural life of Kerala in his *Tullals* (a poetic as well as a performing form of art founded by him, as a pastiche of the ancient classical form, *Chaakyaar Koottu*,), ploughed up the social values of the time.

19 *The five tinas*: Reference to the poetic division of the ancient *Thamizhakam* (the ancient South Indian Civilization) into five regions according to the subject-matter of poetry that was adopted—*kurinchi* for hilly-forest regions, *mullai* for forests, *paalai* for wasteland, *marutam* for agricultural lands, and *neital* for seashore.

20 "*Tanki jaa rahi saab*", in Hindi means: "The water tanker has moved away, Sir!"

21 *Kaakolam*: According to Indian Mythology, *Kaakolam* is the poison that emerged along with Amrit (the sacred drink ambrosia that induced immortality) when Devas churned Paalazhi (the Ocean of Milk). Lord Siva, one of the trinity of Gods, drank the poison to save the universe and to enable the Deva community to enjoy Amrit.

22 "*Paani naa lena, kya?*" in Hindi means: "Don't you want to collect water?"

Elzy Taramangalam

Impromptu Verse

Here's a story from Newfoundland
As I heard it from the herd
Once a girl met a boy
In heart's delight
They courted and married
In heart's desire
And went on to conception bay
For honeymoon, work and play
They lived happily ever after
At heart's content
This they swear is no adventure
Story from twinkle toe land
Nor the beginning of the end
But true life between
The door and the wall
The sea and the shore
The most poetic nowhere
On this grasping continent.

Oman

Just when living here
Was turning all debits
Switching from beggar
To muse she writes
Poem after poem
Like a call to prayer
Full of grace and praise

Prowling out of a dark place
Not tamped and muted
But dancing in the rain of words
Climbing on the wings of wind

Move over Sindbad
This is Cinderella in Sohar
Reclaiming glories of a legend
Lost O-man!

Vow

Breaking the non-stop
Sameness of our life
Regularly I do
Become an imp
In an invented tale
The shared strangeness
Of other places
Their desperate distances
The divided intimacies
The descending silences
Make our portable world
Real, felt, desired, feared.
A wandering woman
To your fixed Rodin
Waltzing around you
I pledge I do.

Answer

Here is the truth
Lord of my heart
Some lie imaginatively
Some lie conveniently
Some do it for pleasure
Some to cause pain
Not wanting to tell you

Something I'm exquisitely
Resolutely silent
Resorting to the Buddhist
Remembrance trick
The answer must exist
For, once we knew it.

Barrage

Elephant in the house
Rhubarb in the room
Chop off the root
And shear the head
Only the stalk is good.

Chose the object
For what it is not
As much as what it is
Wherever nature whispers
We bellow.

Whenever thieves neglect
To augment the theft
Charges should be laid
For lack of consternation
Compare what was and
What was not a captured miracle.

Now and Then

Maids will be burnt
Maids will be canonized
It's not love
It's not hate
It is worse.
In plain words
It's just reward
For free will

In a world of blasted hopes
Afraid of subtleties.

Stripes and Splendour

The Indian squirrel
Is a regular rodent
A dull gray mammal
That got pretty lucky

By the stroke of a hand royal
Divine, Rama blessed
The worker in gratitude
Making toil worthy for eternity

It wasn't a question
Of being in the right
Place at the right time
Nor the outward appearance

But the sum total of experience
The splendour on the back
Three white stripes
The embers of grace aglow.

Artist's Eye Poet's Tongue

The more confusing the world
The more, sore searching they do
Waking up from practised procrastination
Dimly perceived capacities

Gathering up the pieces
Assets that have become liabilities
Mingling with bizarre compulsions
Body, flesh and fluid

Mangling them like an assassin
A sweet kite on a killer string
A gauche gift for saying the wrong things
In epicene language, shot with deft punctuations

Never results in Rubik's-cube satisfaction
Of getting all the pieces to click together
In picture post-card perfection
The connections and the brokenness.

Summer Smarts

Put a spider and a pirate
In a gold fish bowl
Boy that is cool
Summer marvel
Unfolding with a twist and a roll

If it's a Chilean
Black widow then
Blessed strapping farmers
Turn perpetual lovers
Becoming heaven
In deathly hollows

Totally fatal
To the tottering elderly
Veering to implicit telegraph memories
Ready for other worlds
Praying for heaven languidly.

Transgressions

When you are dull and weary
What bliss it is to glide
Like a bit of dandelion fluff
From one neatly mowed
Monochromatic lawn to the next
In unarticulated joy

Dispersing to smithereens on wind
Cheating dead ends
En masse to nature's sign
Heart overflowing mind propelled
To some enigmatic foreshadowing
Of complex volume and void
On a cosmic ride
Refusing to live small
In itemized purity
In an incendiary word-land.

❑



Farhat Nasreen

Déjà vu

Like water in clouds
Like colour in flowers
Like whiteness in milk
Like mysterious fragrance in wet mud
Like the magic in love
Her memories are intrinsic with the current

When multiple shades of the sky looked confusing
When roads seemed like measureless snakes
When synthetic masks appeared to be flesh and blood
When I lost way in the ebony woods called world
She held me with her luminous hands

An inexplicable sense of déjà vu envelops me, submerging me in itself
The past overtakes the present
And I can almost hear her calling me
Lost in a smoke that never clears
I keep walking through the mists of conscience
Stumbling over regrets
But cognate with a lover, blind to the beloved's erratum
I cherish her without any conditions
Her indelible impressions are the jewels of my treasure box

So what if she had to leave?
She has not left me alone
She still is the happiness in my laughter and tears in my eyes
As I smile over her thoughts, she relaxes in the cracks of my lips
Invisible and inaudible, she is all around me
Because love loves to defy death.

The Little Soul

The dream that she never dreamt
The scene that she never saw
The song that she never sung
The life that she never lived
Her share was usurped, because she was a female

She screamed but there was no sound
She cried but there were no tears
She pleaded but no one listened
She died but no one cried
She was killed unborn, because she was a female

She had gifts to give but there were no takers
She had secrets to share but there were no listeners
She had ends to achieve but there were no allies
She had love to offer but no one cared
Family turned murderous, because she was a female

The journey from her mother's womb to the garbage dump was small
But the question that the little soul asked God was big
His equity, He had said was supreme
Was there no justice for her because she was a female?

Sounds of a Silent Gun

Sounds of a silent gun echo on
A toy held firmly in the hands of a frenzied woman
Pumping imaginary bullets in real people at a traffic signal

Some ladies point at her with their delicately manicured fingers
Others look through as if a strand of disarrayed hair matters more
Some men mock her
Laughter makes their eyes water
But these are tears of death;
Death of their sensitivity

It is a short encounter and the lights turn green
One army of colourful cars is replaced by another

And the woman continues her play
Whom does she want to kill?
Someone whose lust, greed for wealth or power minced her soul?
Or is she simply a divine joke?
But why is humanity making a mockery of itself?

Stars never die even in mid-noon
They only disappear to resurface in darkness
Let us break the barbarian handcuffs of bigotry
And free ourselves of arrogant indifference
Before we are slaughtered at the alter of the God of egotism
And sounds of the gun explode
To drown us in the red dye of blood
Let us stop, let us think, let us act....

Friends

Just yesterday they were playing together in the dust,
Their ears newly pierced, their hair as long as a pig's tail,
Tied with coloured ribbons,
Neighbours next door, friends of fame,
Their imagination flew like multicoloured kites in a cool airy sky,
Limitless like their games
Oh! Where had they learned such proficiency in affection?

Watching *Janmashtami Jhankis* together was fun,
Their eyes twinkled together on Deepawali nights,
Both wore new clothes on *Eid*, spent the day together.
They grew;
All colours around them changed,
But they played *Holi* in the same hue of love.
How much of faith did they not have?

Once their world was torn apart,
Split into two, swayed now by anger, now by greed.
When the holocaust ceased, crossing over dead bodies
Dodging death, their fathers came, but brothers didn't
Never.

They cried dry
Tears fell even as they wiped them away,
Eyes restless, bodies flaccid;
As if someone had buried them very deep and still they were breathing;
Hearing echoes of screams they had heard,
Sizzling like a funeral pyre.

They lost treasures agglomerated over the years,
But does the loss needs to continue?
Can't frowns behind *burqas* and *bindis* be transmuted into smiles?
Which divinity enfranchises violence?
Yet such a waste of humanity?

The questions are threatening, but the answers lie within
Let us search them....

The Lost Poem

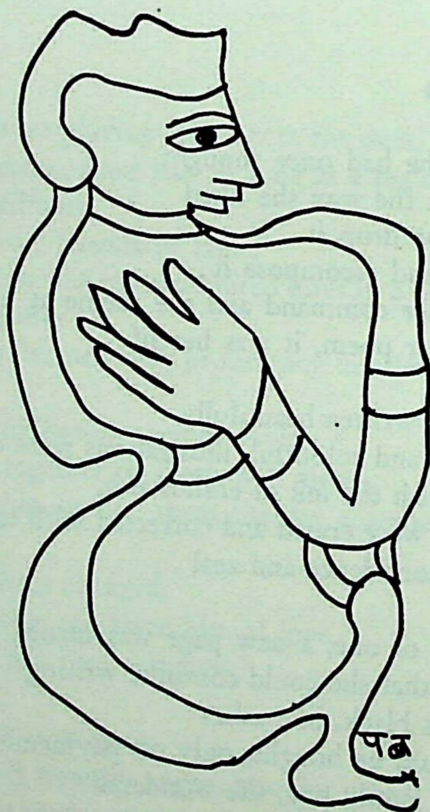
Life is a poem, she had once thought
She could write it the way she liked
Choose a word or drop it
Cut an odd line and recompose it
The pen was at her command and the theme at her disposal
After all it was her poem, it was her life

The first page was written beautifully
Her pencils sharp and colourful; illustrations were of parental love
Her pens filled with the ink of enthusiasm,
Spelling mistakes were erased and corrected with tender reprimand
She wrote with confidence and zeal

With the ending of one, a new page was turned
It was promised that she could continue writing
But the page was black, like ashes
A clean page could be bought, only on payment
How would her family pay, she wondered
She tried to write with white ink
Which was unlike the earlier hues she loved
As the ink ran out, her pen was snatched, broken and burnt

The black page was blank
As she stood alone at the margins
She glanced at the refreshing lines she had written earlier
And decided that she could not leave this poem incomplete
She will not accept defeat, she will plunge into the sea of words and opportunities;
She will find a new page, a new pen, a new life....
After all it was her life, it was her poem....
And she was never going to lose it





Ghulam Nabi Khayal

The Poet and the Shama

Wrapped in night's shadowy veils,
The sun dropped behind that hill,
And the crimson glow of the evening sky
Began to fade away.

The trees stand numb;
The birds have now retired to their nests.
Solitude stretches itself; loneliness plumes its wings.

The solitary light burning on the top of Sulaiman Hill
Is like a will-o'-the-wisp lying in wait for wayfarers.
The mountains look like deserted, unshrouded corpses,

The moon like one in a swoon in a haze-covered starry sky
Silence has sealed all music,
And hushed lies every voice,
But for the owl's hoots that assail my ears from every side.
Time moves with tired feet;
Dusk has not changed to night,
And wild despair grips one's soul,
For dawn seems far away.

I give my life for you, O Shama, O lamp!
For having brought me light,
A balm for heart's sore wounds,
A hope that I will meet my Love.
Though burning is your destiny
For you chose it at your birth,
The moths that are dancing round your flame

Will forsake you when it's out
This is the way the world goes,
But it shouldn't warp your soul

Wind and storm seek your life
As the world's spears are aimed at mine.
Nemroud was destined to be the king,
Socrates to drink the poisoned cup,
Farhaad fruitlessly to dig a canal for milk to flow.

I've seen wine for the worthless flow,
True zeal rewarded with bitterness,
Flowers in the graveyard bloom
And hail destroys the bowers.

What lovely forms are dust,
How many houses desolate!
How many young men gathered
By the moral scythe of Time!
O how many are palanquin-borne only to desolation,
Bright Henna changed to dull mud on their hands!

My eyes have ached to see the stars,
I've paid for the dew with my tears,
My days are spent here
Plunging into deeps and shoals of thought.
But ever floats before my eyes
The face that shames the Kartik moon.

That body lovely like the mirror-clean stream,
That cypress stature which keeps alive my flame,
Those fawn's eyes at which I've drunk goblets of wine.

O what use it is to cry?
Dreams were strangled young!
The tulip nurses the wound in his heart:
He does it silently

O life, with your changing moods
Of the spring breeze,

The impulsive beating of an innocent heart,
The grace of one's love!

You are also the poison-filled cup,
A corpse decaying on the road,
An evening in this jail

(This poem was composed in the Central Jail, Srinagar, where the poet was incarcerated for political dissent in 1958 for two years.)

Translated from Kashmiri by Trilokinath Raina

A Song in a Kashmir Village

You've stopped our meeting every morn and eve
At the Spring,
How hard, my love!

Why came you then at all
To feed the gossips with our tale?

You wore hyacinth print,
Your rosy hands were dyed in Henna paste
How vulnerable to the taunts the village elders hurled at you!

Your village cast a spell on me;
Though a townsman, I forget the town.

It was a tyrant love that drove me here,
A prey to common jibe.

Be wary of your jealous friends;
They'll sell our love to common tongues.
And tear to bits my clothes,
And they won't spare your skirt,
How hard!

I said, "Bewitching is the moon tomorrow,
Let's make love under the blossoming peach."

You said, "What ruse I give at home, and come to the peach."
How hard?

Translated from Kashmiri by Jiya Lal Kaul

At the Frontier Post

This spot of earth was scorched by enemy fire
And sprinkled with the blood of man.
At this very spot at the frontier post,
Far, far away from home, my comrades dug a hole
And buried my bullet-ridden body:
The body of mine which in its lusty youth
Was caressed by my land of birth,
Nourished in every fibre for months and years,
By lakes and tarns and vigorous highland breeze,
Which saw its glorious sun-births and sunsets glow.

Should you, perchance, come to that dreary spot,
The shade of Shalimar Chinars will welcome you,
And you will feel rested as on Dal Lake shores.
The dust you tread upon will rose bloom,
You cannot step but on a flowerbed.

Here, resting awhile, a thought may tease your mind:
"War came here trailing destruction and death,
Drenching this spot with streams of blood,
Charging the air with gun powder and bombs,
How is it then the earth is green again,
And there is a stir of life around?
Birds fly up in the air,
The breeze blows fresh and cool."

Then standing up you cast a look around,
A tomb obscure will greet your eye,
And you will understand,
This dreary spot will for ever Kashmir be.

(This poem was inspired by Rupert Brooke's *The Soldier*)

Translated from Kashmiri by Jiya Lal Kaul

Someone

I was the aroma
Of the spring breeze
How could I know?
Wherever I spread?

The whole night long
I searched for
The market place
And wilderness,
But on reaching home
In broad daylight
I lost my way.

He stole my heart
A long time back,
Ask not when?
Ask not who?

Should I convey him?
Through the winnowing wind
That he alone will suffer
Who is destined to suffer.

Tulips didn't bloom
On the rooftop of clay
Since someone
Occupied the house below.

O Khayal, you write
Verses sweet
Inasmuch as
You think of
someone.

A Guru you're guiding yourself
That too is Khayal, and no one else.

Translated from Kashmiri by Hameed Mumtaz

The Prayer

It's the same pain, the same old affliction,
Time and again, our wounds were cut open.
So many incisions, so many times.
Don't we have any escape from anguish?

Time has changed its colours before our eyes.
We looked at it steadily and earnestly,
And lost our own eyesight.

The night, a night in a jungle,
Besieged in frightful mountains.
Don't we have to see the light?

This dry and dark deep well,
Where we reached today,
Shall turn deeper and black tomorrow.
This room where we sang songs of the sun,
It is now covered with the thick blanket of darkness.
This imprisoned night
How can we see the blonde hair of the beloved?
How can we find her even in her shadow?
Come, ye, my friends, illuminate the whole of it.
If you don't have lamps,
Why not to kindle your hearts?

Yesterday, when I accompanied you in broad daylight,
I came from closed room into openness,
Where I had spent every moment like a chained sick man.
I don't know where you led me to,
I recall that the soles of my feet fell on embers,
The birds had their thirsty beaks parched,
The air carried a stink of gunpowder.

I recall,
Where there was a dried up tree in wilderness,
Someone amongst us recited from Eliot:
"Here is no water but only rock,
Rock and no water and the sandy road,
The road widening above among the mountains,

Which are mountains of rock without water,
If there were water we stop and drink,
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think,
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand,
If there were only water amongst the rock."[1]
I remember this much and nothing else.

My room is again guarded by the same darkness,
I must go to sleep now.
I was reading the Old Testament,
To get my restive soul consoled,
To get my killing pain subsided.
May be only for a few moments,
To get my thirsty heart quenched.

I was absorbed in reading the Bible:
"And when the sun was going down,
A deep sleep fell upon Abraham;
And, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him.
And he said unto Abraham,
Know of surety that thy seed shall be a stranger
In a land that's not theirs,
And shall serve them,
And they shall afflict them for four hundred years."[2]

My sleep is gone,
The night is burning.
I would cry loud and loud.
A wild cry bringing out the blood of my heart
Through my eyes.
Then, I would pray in supplication to the Lord:
O' Lord, forgive me for my sins,
I am overpowered by distracted thoughts,
I lose sight of my destination even on the right path,
Dreams of sweet water are diluted in a mirage,
O Lord forgive this bondsman,
Forgive me, my Lord.

Translated from Kashmiri by the Poet

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1. Verses from *The Wasteland* by T.S. Eliot
2. *The Old Testament*: Genesis Chapter 15:12-13

Jayanta Krishna Sarmah

Whither Home

Brother
You're tomorrow's Ethiopia-Somalia's child
My brother had said.
It had struck me not that day.
(Perchance Brother meets you
He surely will re-iterate the same to you too.)

Fear not then,
(Where fear-stricken heart saps courage
Yet compels outrage too.)

To be an Ethiopian child
One need not just have a starving stomach
Or a skeletal trunk.

Heart burning with pent-up emotions
Impels the Eritrean to voice his misgivings.
But at the cost of his life.
And such suppression in Eritrea
Is just another face of Ethiopia!

Just here, when 'Buddha Smiled' in Pokhran
children starved in Lumbini.
When Su Kyi's tears drenched Rangoon's cell
And ULFA men laid down their arms—
Was it not just another face of Somalia then?

(Encompassing right from Eritrea to East-Timur
And Lekhapani to Mahakali

Through mountains and seas
Stretching upon your own threshold
Inroads are being built—they say...)

No less truth in it Sir,
For when your beloved
Or my life-giver: my mother
lie dying in bed
And the life-saver 'Quinine'
Rushed from the market
becomes the life-taker.

Weren't they to enjoy the hearth
Rather led to be driven on the hearse?
Still such fate rules one and all
For where is one bound each day—to office or to coffin?

I find myself
In the midst of the streets of Mogadishu

Surely.
To be an Ethiopian or Somalian child
One need not just have a starving stomach
a skeletal trunk.
Neither be born in some forlorn African land.

Translated from Nepali by Anuradha Bhattarai

A Little Love

Mother's heart-beat says
Surely son will come back some day...

Those living thus are like the lovers
Distance making their hearts fonder
Overwhelming it with love for their loved ones

As ripe banyan seeds seek always
To grow beside the mother-plant's trunk

As the white sands of the seas
Seem never to be quenched with salt sea water

Likewise love's little boat
Anchors life
Always give some reason to live.
Though blind one can laugh—
Though deaf one can dance—
Hands and limbs paralysed, still one can live—

But with eyes to see, ears to hear
And food in plenty to feed
Wonder why
One feels the urge to hang oneself to death!!

Translated from Nepali by Anuradha Bhattarai



Navkirat Sodhi

Xylo

Atmosphere ends
The rain of fire
It's not even the start
When we neared the bottom

Earth falls
Rises yet again
Despite vapourisation
The tears remain

Spewing out bellowing out
Endless *déjà vu*
When you begin I end
And that gives birth to all

She dances in a crazy rage
Red hair then black
I wish to become her feet
Or the air around her skirt

Strings pull themselves
The wind is really strong
But there is no choice
Unless he wants to die

That death however
Won't be longer than a day
When he sees her eyes again
The world won't be hazy anymore

Sight so deceptive
Defeats its own reason
Showing what is not
And yet so convincing
Though we'll never know
The truth that is sought
Is always next door
But all the while we're tired
Too lazy to reach
Destinations change face
Only travellers remain
The same as 100 BC
The sand dunes get higher

Pages grow old
Yellow bright as gold
More replete with stories
So full of monotony

Why do you need to know
Why she thinks that way?
You and I are too old
We moved on ages ago

Rhythm that sets in
Distasteful it becomes
With people and stories
And staleness sets in

To feel wobbly
In the fingers
Is better than any high
To watch him stoop
The mask still on
While the angel stares
From the corner of the eye

Un

Yesterday or day before
Somewhere between sleep and dream
A soul called beauty passed by
Capture me she said
Free me from eternity
Make a mortal of me
Like joy, like death
Like your other subjects
Under her spell
I lived each day
Too scared to blink
Day and night
We stayed entwined
Making love bizarre
Lost in her
I lost again
She must have left
When I began to drift
Away into a dream
When my eyes unclosed
I lay alone
And Time lay dead
Next to me

Sojourney

Crossed the graveyard this morning
It's always prettier at night
Then they're all quiet
Then at least they don't fight
Once on a quiet, stormy night
I sat down to talk to them
I said I wanted to be like them
They said I already was, that I need not fight

Then the one with deep brown locks
Began to play the harp
He played he played till music became tears

Played till all light turned to dark
That was the moment I was poor
I had lost all I ever had
At that instant I possessed
All of this universe mad

Ariel

Why tears be mourned
Do they not form
A bigger part of the space
We call our own

Float

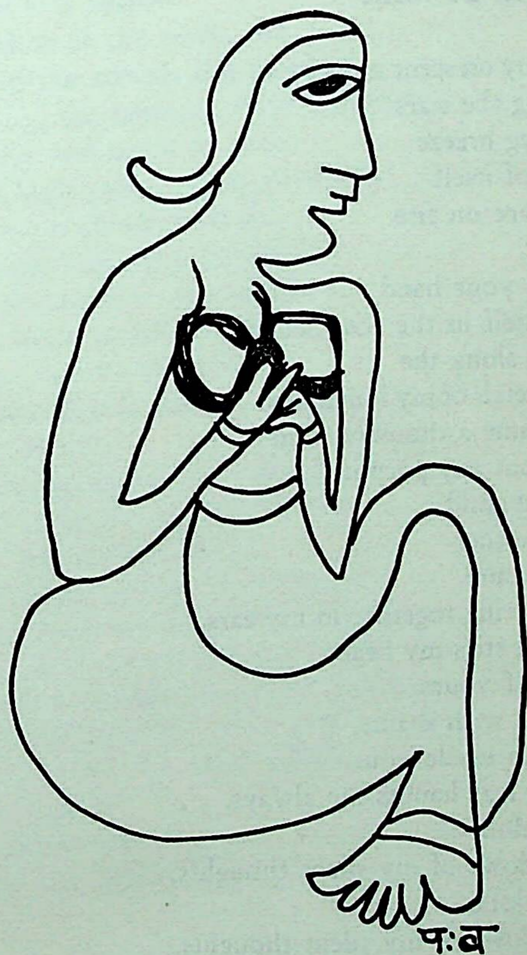
Let me take in the stench
Till it becomes my only perfume
Let all insects with feelers and wings
Know what I hold inside
Closest to my blood
They and not this world
May one day understand
What happens to the heart
When it sees another weep

Rich Olive

An evening free
A life borrowed
Rare scotch
Perfumed air
A stolen glance
Hidden desires
To become the mask
That is now
Weary of wearing
The daily lie

Come home
Come now
Show me how
Truth became
The play we live today.





Nilima Chatterjee

Let the World Be Mine

When the lonely crescent moon
wanders among the stars
when the spring breeze
is spendthrift of itself
and the trees are on fire
with flowers....
I long to hold your hand
and droop myself in the cosy feeling
of your touch along the
lengthening stretch of my loneliness.
I utter your name a thousand times
I utter it without any purpose
like an innocent child
who calls its mother
only to get pleasure.
Thousand bells ring together in my ears,
an endless thirst stirs my heart
for a glimpse of yours.
My eyes burden with shame,
I hide myself to evade you.
A flickering of fear haunts me always,
I weep sitting alone
among the shadows of my silent thoughts,
I weep sitting alone
among the shadows of my silent thoughts.
I wait for you with a feeling of pain and joy.
Come and encompass me, my love
make me open in many flowers
let the world break into my life like a flood

the waves of my unsung melodies
wash your feet but
I know not how to reach them.
I yell, let me be proud of being your servant.
I wake up in sudden fear
I can hear the tumult of death afar
not only in New York or Washington
but very close to my heart.
I clasp your hands and my heart
plunges into the dark of your eyes,
enquiring if it is again—
"the cowardice of the weak, the
arrogance of the strong, the greed of
fat prosperity, the rancour of the wronged,
pride of race and insult to man
has burst God's peace, raging in storm."
Wrapping me within your heart
in numberless folds, you console—
though evils overflow their banks
soon they cease to be prodigy
for mother's tears, sister's love,
a wife's waiting and martyr's blood
will never be lost
without buying heaven with their price.
With your song echoing in the dark
'caves' of my being I heave
with my clipped wings I can no longer
accept the invitation of a flying bird.
So before my days pass into the dark
let me weave the wreath to crown you
let me lit the lamp to have a glance at you
let me know why the earth called
me to her arms.
Let me know my love
shall I be ever one with you.

❑

Praveen Gadhvi

O the Lost Moses

The waters of Chawdar lake are dumbfounded.
In the sky, the heart of the angel of history does not beat, the eyelids do not bat.
He had seen Moses in rags, Christ with crown of thorns
He had seen spartaeus nailed on the Roman highway,
Washington mounting the horse for Freedom, Equality and Fraternity,
Gandhi burning the entry permits,
Lenin beheading the Czar.
But he had never seen,
never heard,
a movement for a sip of water,
On the banks of Chawdar lake under the scorching sun.
Why have American photo journalists not come?
The Vedas, the Holy Quran and the Bible say that air, water and light are for everyone.
What a barbarous custom, which denies
These to untouchables?
O lost Moses, you did not even taste the water of Chawdar.
We do not want your mercy.
We want human rights.
We want dignity.
You thumped on the round table and thundered that there
is a third India—the India of the shadows of the untouchables,"
half naked and starving people.
They breathe in British India on the outskirts of villages on dung heaps
near skeletons of dead cattle.
Buddha and Gandhi were visitors only.
You were born and brought up on the dung heaps of the Maharwadas.
You were discarded by upper class people.

It is better to be famished than discarded.
You told Gandhi, Jinnah and Lord Mountbatten that, as they were dividing the country they should give us only self-respect.
In the Mughal Gardens of Delhi you added some pages inked with your blood in the Constitution written for the oppressed brethrens for the first time in history.
You cut off the life cord of Manu and said that another end of this cord is lying in the self-ruled villages of Gandhi.
It is lying in the far away village Golana,
Where there are untouchable bonded labourers,
Where there is starvation,
Where there is no water for untouchables to drink.
Where there are threats and warnings to untouchables.
The waters of Chawdar lake are still untouchable.
You are only hundred years of age in the egoist blind customs of five thousand years.
O, lost Moses,
The desert path of Sinai is still endless.

Translated from Gujarati by the Poet

Leaving the Village

We will never cross the river now, we were crossing it daily while going to plough our farms.
We were living in this village as a Banyan tree grown on the village outskirts since the drought of eighteen fifty-six Vikram Samvat.
The cyclone could not have uprooted us,
but they had sharp and burnished axes.
By the time the sun set, they cut off our legs rooted in the earth.
Small farms on riverbank, thatched huts,
Some greenish yellow-coloured clothes purchased from a village fun-fair,

Some bowls and platters,
Those robbers snatched and burnt everything.
We were drinking sweet coconut like water from the river—
Those wolves said:
'Don't drink a drop of water, it becomes impure because of you',
They like to eat and drink only raw flesh and blood.

Those wolves did not allow us to graze a single blade of grass,
We are tired, unable to put forward even a step.
The river of the village craves that we don't leave the village.
The boundaries of the village restrain us.
But what can we do?
See, how many wolves are barking beside our blazing huts far away.

Translated from Gujarati by the Poet

Dignity

Whose dignity?
What type of dignity?
Where was dignity?
How to salvage dignity from painful history?
None became Parshuram.
None fought wars and conquered.
The defeat was accepted cowardly,
before Phule-Ambedker
Whose dignity are you talking about?
We had no dialect, no prosody.
We had no clothes—no dress.
We had no food—no seven course dinner—
We had no etiquette.
We were never considered as human beings in the whole of history,
before Phule—Ambedker.
Where was our dignity?
We had no religion, no temple to worship.
We were bent, and bonded.
How can we see the limitless sky?
We had never seen the open sky.
before Phule—Ambedker.
The broom was in our hands,
The bucket of excreta was on our head,
The kicks of insults were on the loin,
The shoe was hanging on our back,
before Phule—Ambedker.
Whose dignity are you talking about?
What type of dignity did we have?

Where was our dignity,
before Phule—Ambedker?

Translated from Gujarati by the Poet

Freedom at Midnight

We got our freedom at the stroke of midnight
We pull out our swords of enmity of past generations.
Now we seek revenge for the remaining night.
They compelled the queen of Patan to be their begum.
We were run over by Aurangzeb's horses and Shahjehan built the Taj Mahal.

If we would have erected a China Wall on the east bank of Sutluj river,
the eighth great grandfather of Mehrunissa would not have crossed the river to capture Firozpur.
Now let us erect a long wall with the heaps of corpses of those people.
So that the mellow air of Lahore cannot flow into Amritsar.
We got our freedom at the stroke of midnight.
Lord Radcliffe Sir,
Please take this knife and kindly draw
a line of blood on the bare bosom of our mother.
Please divide the pages of the history of seven hundred years and give us our share.
We will sew the empire of Ashoka with that of Shivaji.

Please weigh in scales the soil of Sialkot–Pathankot.
Please split the boundaries of Pakpattan and Fazilka.
We got our freedom at the stroke of midnight.

Translated from Gujarati by the Poet

Gandhi

No one, except you, Gandhi, come to my hut at Champaranya among flies, hunger and stench of tannery, not even Rama, Krishna and Buddha.
You are the first chapter of my unwritten history.

You left the garden parties of Prof. Gokhale, well furnished drawing rooms of Jinnah and glittering cities of Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta and Madras.
Gandhi, you caught the B.B. and C.I. railways to trace me in the far corner of this vast continent-country.
There was no address of mine in history.
There was no city of mine in geography.
Even though, you came in the heavy rain on elephant back.
You stopped the galloping horses like the orders of the Lt. Governor with the blunt weapon of my worn-out voice.
No one, not even Rama, Krishna, Buddha had left floating on the slow flowing Ganga a piece of cloth to cover the chastity of a naked tribal woman.
I am limp and lame by birth,
I was not able to stand before a village officer.
But Gandhi, in no time you taught me to stand before the firing rifles of General Dyer.
Gandhi, you put the blazing crown of Lord Curzon in my bowl by your non-violent march to Dandi.
You were neither Marx, nor Lenin,
You were neither Einstein, nor Mahavir,
Even though, you rained silently on the burning city of Calcutta and extinguished the flames of the whole city.
You dropped orange juice on the heap of arms dipped in the orange and green blood of Hindu and Moslem.
Nobody had walked up to Noakhali except you.
They were engrossed in the tunes of the national song after hoisting the national flag in the place of the Union Jack.
They were in a hurry to ascend the broken throne of the Viceroy.
At that time Gandhi, you came to my smouldering village leaning on the shoulders of Manu and Abha.
Gandhi, when you tried to step into my darkness,
Nathuram fired bullets on you,
It was the end 'Hey Ram...'
Nobody has entered my home after you, across the stains of your blood, Gandhi.
Now nobody greater than you will ever enter the dark forests of my Champaranya.

Translated from Gujarati by the Poet

Ranu Uniyal

Hope

I see myself, you and him
Drifting
Sinking
Falling
Into the cold
Passionless blaze of twilight
Sleep
They say
For the next morning
Could be your
Only means of resurrection.

Guilt

Now that you have become
A presence
Everywhere
In and out
Out and in
The air is heavy
With the burden of your smiles
The streets do not smell the same
They stretch at endless nooks
And my feet are afraid of being worn out
The walls and bricks suddenly haunt me
And I with a chest soaked in guilt

Cringe at every corner
Afraid you'd know
I have lost my face
And can find it no more.

Desire

Last summer
One such evening
I stretched my hand for gold
And saw it slither away
Like sand
Away from me
Embracing darkness that comes of coal.

Life

I wish we had met
When I was young
And you were whole

Now time's cup is full
And I did see life bring
Its own share of indigo and rain

But with a yearning for more
It becomes difficult
Almost impossible

If this life were to ask me
How did it go
I would let her know

Hard it was to live
And I happened to live
Without you by my side.

Distance

Tomorrow, you promised .
And I almost cried
Needled anxiety, prodding fingers
Those between us smiled.
Caressing memories
Of frayed dandelions.
We raced against ties.
Feelings. Wrapt up emotions.

A toast to a lost friendship
He opened a bottle of cognac.

Inchoate and sullen like a lover's kiss
Something between us walked out
And mingled
With the banquet crowd.

Alone
I longed to crush
Your whereabouts.



Yoseph Macwan

That Fellow

That fellow
with the weight of a shadow
is fractured.

That fellow
with the language *sans* language
is cleft.

That fellow
is ruptured wham
with the rhythm without cadence.

That fellow
is corroded from all sides,
with the sharp nails of dreams
sucking blood in veins.

That fellow is nibbled.
He is found
while excavating
in the twenty-first century
Do you know
Who is he?

Translated from Gujarati by Vijay Pandya

Hospital and Sky

I sit in my room no.608
Sleepy darkness from the eyes drips outside the window
and convinces me of the river Sabarmati living!
Here, there, hither, thither
there are same spots of light
and up above
the vast expanse of the sky of night
also has perched like me.
In between is a mirror of flat air.
From earth to the sky
is an image of a lion of deafening silence
I stare without batting an eyelid
from the earth to the sky
and inquire
what is the suspense about us?
What is the mystery lying hidden in the sky
I immerse myself in the silence of moments.
Moments are mine
but somewhere splintering the silence
Wailing of a dog drags away these moments
and again I am emptied
and filled up
with the hospital,
the sky is left outside lurching.

Translated from Gujarati by Vijay Pandya

Light

Light frightens us
Do you know?
When you are groping in the dark
pecking something
rummaging through something
or even trying to break darkness
or trying to roast like popcorn
engrossed in yourself.

Suddenly light jumps in and
you are dumbfounded.
Do you know as
Light frightens us...?
So does darkness frightens in light...

Translated from Gujarati by Vijay Pandya

A Monologue by an Ordinary Person

I have a wakeful nod
feel, I am stranger in my own land
I am not fortunate to smile
(Is it there?)
I am lost in the dazzle of freedom
I am sweating, sizzling, on the slopes
of mountain ranges of Himalayan scams
I run to escape
with my legs getting blood
with the stones of religion on the path.
I sink on the ground helpless
I behold materialism on all sides.
I am trapped in the
cobwebs and cobwebs hanging.
Whence have I come?
I rush to escape
but the female serpents of systems
sniff and sniff me and peck me
and lay eggs of dreams in my eyes.
For years
Bapu on the wads of currency notes goes on witnessing all these things
and smile and smile and smile
in his heart!

Translated from Gujarati by Vijay Pandya



The Third Eye

Aabid Surti

Once there was a millionaire.

He possessed all that a millionaire could—a grand mansion with lush green lawns and flower beds. In the courtyard there was a circular swimming pool and around it were cane chairs, tables and a swing for two. But he seldom enjoyed these luxuries. Occasionally, on a holiday he would sit on the swing with his wife if she insisted endearingly. Then he would softly exchange sweet nothings with her for quite some time. The subject of conversation was invariably the same.

He: I am the happiest person in this world.

She: I am no less fortunate.

He: When I married you, friends and neighbours used to comment—a stepmother is no good for children. But you have showered more love on my children than a real mother would.

She: I have only done my duty.

The old man had a disposition that set him apart from others. Despite being a millionaire, he led a simple and austere life. He had two cars in the garage but he preferred to travel on foot or by bus. There was also a buggy in the house but no one remembered the old man ever having gone for a ride in it.

An old servant at times recalled the days when sethji preferred to ride in the carriage. Those were the days when he had a distinctive lifestyle. He would dress and walk like an Englishman, and converse in fluent English. Gone were those days and with it that life style too. Looking at him today, in a white kurta pyjama, no one would believe that this was the Seth Sunderlaı of days gone by.

He went for a walk every evening. Sometimes it would take him to distant places and he would return well after dusk. His jaunts took him to unusual spots. Instead of strolling leisurely by the seaside every

evening, he liked to break the monotony once a week or so, and wandered around the crowded Bhuleshwar area. The stalls there, selling everything from a pin to an elephant, fascinated him. The roadside vendors with their decorated food carts engaged his attention for a long time.

Yet, it was difficult to pinpoint his likes and dislikes. He was interested in all creations of nature—animals, birds, flowers, trees, the moon, stars, pebbles...That explained his love for his family also. And may be that was the reason for his happiness too.

At times he felt he had failed to make his wife happy. She was young and he was old, almost. But her serene face dispelled all his doubts. When he left the house, she saw him off with a broad smile and welcomed him back warmly. There was a sense of contentment in her words, body, eyes, and even in her sleep.

One evening he went to the Chor Bazaar - just like that - with nothing specific in mind. He walked through piles of junk, giving them a quick, curious glance and then moved on. Nails, knives, tyres, car parts, books, furniture, shoes, watches, clocks—he went past many piles of such discarded objects. In the end, a cartful of old spectacles caught his eye. A large assortment was strewn all over the cart. Old and new, with glasses and without glasses, with full frames and with no frames, with plastic frames and with silver and golden ones too.

One pair caught his fancy. It had a silver frame with dark glasses. He felt strange as he tried it out. When he looked at the vendor through the glasses, he felt he could read his thoughts. The vendor was thinking—The guy looks bankrupt but his appearance betrays his opulence. I will extract at least twenty bucks from him.

Sunderlal took off the glasses and offered two rupees! The vendor was taken aback, and somewhat irritated. "The frame alone is worth twenty five rupees. I will accept no less than fifteen."

Sunderlal put the spectacles back on the cart and pretended to leave.

"Okay, give me ten bucks...five...three..."

The deal was struck at two and a half rupees. He bought the glasses but did not let anyone know about its magical powers. He did not even tell his wife when he returned home. There was a reason for it. The wife was a woman and women cannot keep anything under the lid. Such was his experience.

His elder son, Yagya was a young man of thirty two. He was sharing half the burden of the office with his uncle Jayantilal. Shall I disclose it to him? Was it necessary? Not really, he concluded. It would be fun if it remained a secret. Again a question arose—Should I tell

Ketaki? She was his favourite child and could keep a secret despite being a woman; she was an exception.

He went looking from one room to another and not finding her, he shared his secret with his Egyptian cat. For a moment he thought, he was no different from women, giggled and sat down on one of the dining chairs.

"A penny for your thoughts," said his wife, pulling a chair beside him.

He replied, "What do old people think of except death?"

"What a pessimistic thought," the wife snapped. "You are going to live for a long time. Ketaki is in the final year of her studies. The preparations for her marriage have to be started from now. Yagya has vowed not to get married till Ketaki is settled. His turn comes next. After both of them start a new life, Yama, the god of death will appear, but for me, not you."

"How come?" He feigned surprise, "You are still young."

"God only knows..." she replied with eyes brimming with tears, "I will not be able to bear the pain of your death. I want to be the first to go."

Both of them finished eating and got up. Today, Yagya and Ketaki had eaten earlier and Jayantilal had not yet returned from office. On working days everyone ate according to timings convenient to them. But on holidays the entire family dined together on the table .The conversation veered around various topics. Sometimes the discussions became animated.

Sunderlal would not miss the opportunity of recounting a couple of anecdotes of his youthful days (told and retold several times over).Yet, the family members gave him a patient hearing and often responded enthusiastically. He never felt he was unwanted or had lost his relevance.

His buddies always derided their family members, running down their own children. When they would recount the shortcomings of their wives, Sunderlal would thank God silently.

Before going to bed at night, he was tempted many a time to put on his magic glasses and look at everyone with his new eyes. But he curbed his desire fearing people would ridicule him for wearing dark glasses at night. Carefully tucking them under his pillow, he went over the day's happenings and closed his eyes.

Late in the night he woke up to find that his wife was not by his side. He felt slightly disturbed. He had told her countless times that she should not be too concerned about Ketaki. Even then she would get up a couple of times in the middle of the night and go across

to her room. If she found Ketaki studying, she would put off the light, affectionately urge her to go to sleep and return.

In the morning, when the maid brought the tea trolley from the kitchen, he was looking for his magic glasses. Then he remembered, he had taken them from under the pillow and kept them in the wardrobe. He walked up to it, took them out and put them in his kurta pocket.

"Rosy," picking up a cup of tea from the trolley he asked the maid. "Weren't you supposed to go on long leave from today?"

"The weather is not pleasant for travelling," she replied.

"Whenever your leave is sanctioned, you manage to get it cancelled. It is perhaps not possible for you to detach yourself from the maya of this family. What is your salary?"

"Fifty five rupees."

"It will be raised to hundred from next month."

The maid returned to the kitchen, pleased.

The old man hurried with his tea and put on his glasses. The colours of the walls changed. Grey clouds seemed to descend in the room. His eyes narrowed on the calendar. It was Sunday. He got down from the double bed and came to the window.

The sun rays appeared gentler than usual. The lawn spread out before his eyes looked deep green. The bright hues of the flowers seemed to have turned dark red, dark violet, dark blue and dark yellow. The colour of the water in the pool also looked different. Ketaki's radiant face hardly looked bright as he spotted her strolling aimlessly along the edge of the pool.

He focussed his gaze on Ketaki. She looked worried. Pensive too. What was it? It did not take long for him to read Ketaki's thoughts. He shuddered. She had been pregnant for the past two months. Who was the culprit? Peesu of Pedder Road? Rahul of Altamount Road? Or was it the Maruti guy Kwatra?

She was desperately trying to recollect the incident—Rahul of Altamount road...That bastard had not taken precaution. He deceived me in the dark, she thought. It must be his sin that I am carrying in my belly. Abortion is the only option. I will have to go to Khandala with some excuse. The old man will have to be fooled...

Ketaki looked up. She saw her father framed in the window wearing the dark glasses. A shiver ran down her spine. Yet she managed to smile. He smiled back but it was a laboured smile.

"What are you looking at?"

His wife's words made him turn around to face her. They kept looking at each other with steady eyes. He looked odd since she had

never seen him wearing dark glasses. And some what exotic too. If she had bumped into him on the road, she may not have even recognized him.

"When did you buy these?"

"Yesterday."

"Any problem with your eyes?"

"No."

"Then?"

"I liked them so I bought them. How do I look?"

"Impressive!"

Really? But he did not say anything. The wife sat in the easy chair with her unfinished knitting. He sat on the bed facing her. His eyes, behind the dark glasses were scanning her face. His entire focus was on her thoughts.

She was thinking...the old man has lost his mind.

He blinked his eyes behind the glasses.

God knows from where this senile man picks up these things. Yesterday, he brought a broken chair from some junk dealer. Last week he bought a termite laced pile of books. Yagya is right. We should get hold of a doctor soon to certify him insane. His property should be divided equally amongst all family members. The old man is not fit to live in the society. The right place for him to rot is an asylum only.

"You look upset."

Sunderlal's words jolted her but she recovered instantly, "I had started knitting this sweater for Ketaki a couple of months back. I will have to complete it soon. The winter has already set in."

Before his wife could say anything more, Jayantilal came in and stood, leaning against the wall. "Big brother," he said in a playful tone, looking at the old man, "your glasses are the talk of the town. Ketaki was telling me that you look like a hippy."

"And what do you think?"

"Ketaki is not wrong. The frame is indeed an antique piece. Can I try them on?"

He said a firm no. Then he felt he could have been less abrupt. A gentler refusal would have worked just as well.

"Please...if you would just let me wear them once!"
This time he was gentle. "Jayanti, if you wear these glasses, you would be labelled a lunatic."

The old man seems to be telepathic; the wife was cursing him silently. I would be set free if only he would die.

"Jayanti," Sunderlal continued, "to tell you the truth these spectacles are not what they appear to be."

"What are they, then?"

"Magical."

Jayantilal laughed.

Ignoring it, he carried on, "You do not believe me. Do you? But I will prove it. You think of anything and I will tell you what your thoughts are about."

The wife looked up again and kept staring. Jayantilal was quiet. He started thinking for fun...His favourite topic to dwell on was Sunderlal's wife, his own Bhabhi.

Like a headmistress of a girl's hostel, she would take a round of the mansion every night to see if any light was on, especially in Ketaki's bedroom. She would switch it off. And under the cover of darkness, she would stealthily slip into Jayanti's room. After satisfying her mind and body, she returned to the master bedroom.

"Big brother, tell me what I was thinking about?"

"Jayanti...Jayanti..." Sunderlal was breathing heavily. "You were thinking about the office work. The auditors are expected tomorrow and that must be the cause of worry for you."

Jayantilal let out a hearty laugh.

Sunderlal could not bear that laughter. He slowly came out of the mansion and sat by the poolside. He was shaken to the core, his heart was beating wildly and his lips were trembling...God! These glasses have blackened the bright faces of my family members. Could these be really true?

No, of course not. My wife worships me with her heart and soul. Jayantilal is totally innocent, Ketaki is untainted, chaste. And Yagya, my own son can never think of dividing the property. It is my blood that is coursing through his veins. The magic glasses may throw up dirty faces but I won't believe...ever...

He tried his best to dismiss it as a bad dream. But it was easier said than done. The jeering faces would keep popping up before him, mock him and vanish. He just stared with dazed eyes.

In the end he made up his mind. The dark glasses may actually be revealing the truth. To check out, he went to the kitchen. The maid and the old servant were busy preparing lunch. He went and stood behind at a safe distance. Now he fixed his gaze on the maid.

The maid was thinking...last night also she could not succeed in her plan to steal the jewellery box from the cupboard. She did not get a chance though she had made a foolproof plan—to remove the key

from the bunch of keys in the evening and walk out with the jewel box at night. Then catch the first train and vanish into thin air.

Unfortunately she could not lay her hands on the keys. Still she made a last attempt at night. She had gone towards the bedroom but seeing some movement inside, she had rushed back to the servant's quarter. She was thinking hard, really hard. She was cursing herself. She hated herself for failing a third time.

Sunderlal advanced slowly towards her.

"Rosy!"

She turned. Seeing the master in the dark glasses, she left her work, wiped her hands and stood facing him.

"I have come to ask a few questions."

"Sure sir."

"Simply say yes or no to my queries."

"Very well, sir."

"You tried to steal the keys last evening."

"What?"

"True or false?"

"But...but..."

"Last night you tried again but sensing some movements inside, you went back."

The maid fell at his feet and sobbed bitterly.

Now there was not a shadow of doubt left in his mind. Everything the glasses revealed was true. Sunderlal came straight from the kitchen to the living room. A round table conference was in progress. All the members of the family were sitting around Jayantilal, discussing some serious matter. The moment they saw the old man they were silent.

Taking a vantage position from where he could see everyone, Sunderlal asked, "Jayanti, what were you talking about?"

"Nothing in particular, really. Today being a holiday, we were just chatting."

"And...what about you, Ketaki?"

"Me too just gossiping, Dad."

Then he looked at his wife, "And you, my dear?"

"Why are you asking such silly questions?"

"I have yet to ask many more. Where shall I start from?"

Everyone was looking at each other. No one could guess what was brewing in the old man's mind.

"I think it would be best to start with Ketaki, please stand up." She rose at once.

"Where do you go after your College breaks for the day?"

Ketaki could not grasp the implication, "I...actually I come home straight."

"And when you don't come home straight..."

"Dad..."

"That is not the reply to my question."

"What...dad...what do you want to know?"

"Just whose child is it that you are carrying for the last two months?"

Lightning seemed to strike not just Ketaki but the entire family.

"Dad, do you know what you are saying? Are you in your senses?" Sunderlal carried on, "Is it Peesu of Pedder Road, Rahul of Altamount Road or the Maruti guy Kwatra?"

This was a staggering blow for Ketaki. She sank into the chair, covered her face with her hands and sobbed uncontrollably.

"Jayanti!"

It was his turn. He stood up shakily.

First question. "What time do you return from office?"

"Don't you know it?"

"I want to know from the horse's mouth."

"Sometimes at nine, sometimes at ten."

"Then?"

Jayantilal realized now. Trying to remain cool, he replied boldly, "Then I go to bed."

"Alone?"

"What!"

"Alone or with your Bhabhi?"

Seismic tremors had started rocking one and all. Ketaki looked up, her face wet with tears. Yagya was assessing the situation shrewdly, planning his move.

As Jayantilal fumbled for words, Sunderlal's wife got up audaciously to save his skin. "You should be ashamed to talk like that."

"You bitch!" Sunderlal raised his voice, "You are sermonizing me, you of all people, a disgraceful woman! I am ashamed to call you a woman because a woman has her dignity, her honour, her Laxman Rekha. The woman who crosses that line is not a woman but a whore. Got it?"

"Jayanti," she turned to him, "your brother has accused all of us. Tell him; whatever he has said is not true. Absolute lies. There is nothing but madness in his words."

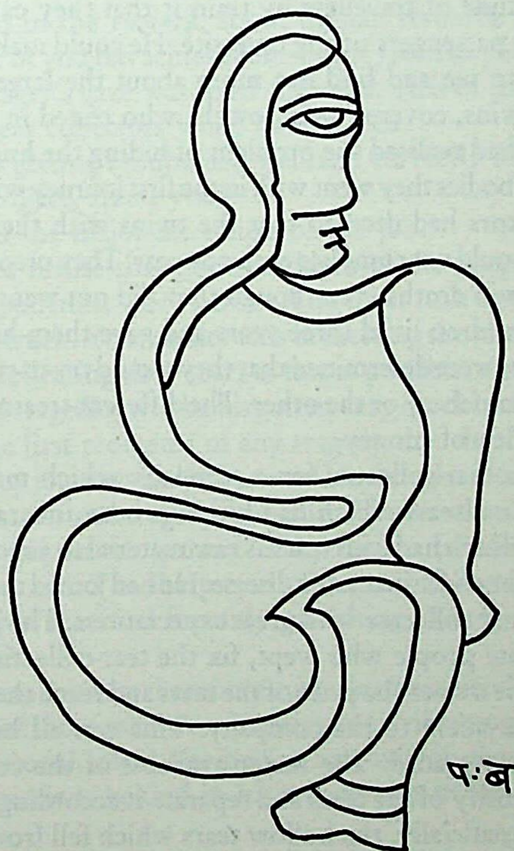
"That my loving son Yagya will tell," said Sunderlal sarcastically. "Yagya, where are you off to? To divide the property? I am still alive,

son. I have enough energy to take charge of the business. The day I am bedridden..."

Yagya walked to the telephone, lifted the receiver and dialled a number. "Hello! Hello! Doctor, I am Yagya. Please come to our house immediately. My dad, about whom I had spoken to you last week, has gone completely insane."

Translated from Hindi by Anil Sud





The Tear-Cow

E.P. Sreekumar

The misfortune of travellers by train is that they cannot evade the gaze of the passengers sitting opposite. He could make out that they were anxious to see and find out more about the larger than normal heads of the twins, covered with towels, who rested in his lap and his wife's lap. He had realised the problem of hiding the huge heads which did not suit the bodies they went with in the first journey with the children.

The doctors had decreed that the twins with their heads which kept growing would not complete even one year. They prepared themselves to accept the twin deaths even though they did not want to bow before fate. But the children lived three years and gave them hope. They too, like any parents, were determined that they would try to cure the children of this disease somehow or the other. The different treatments they kept trying took a lot of money.

He was a tear-collector for a company which made a medicine from tears for a disease which had hitherto been incurable. It was the first company which had used tears as raw material to produce a medicine which treated the so-far incurable disease. He had joined the multinational company as a tear collector with great expectations. The job was simple. He had to locate people who wept, fix the tear-collecting machine on the eyes, give the owner the price of the tears and reach the tears collected in the machine safely to the company. This was all he had to do.

Tears were graded. The meter available at the company would measure the density of the tears and separate it according to the quality. Tears created artificially, the hollow tears which fell from laughter, the flow of tears created by tear gas were of lower quality. They said that the tears which welled up from the bottom of the heart and flowed out in the pain of the soul was of a higher medicinal quality. The price paid was also hiked according to the quality of the tears.

Earlier, it had not been difficult to obtain tears. As time went by, tears became scarcer. Though there were more people weeping, less tears were produced by the weepers. So said a survey made on the subject. The manager revealed these findings in his speech in the meeting of the tear collectors.

You know that we shall have to stop production and close the company if we do not get enough raw material. If we can produce more medicine for that dread disease, we can save the lives of some more people who expect death from the fatal disease. Remember that each drop of tear that you collect saves a life. And therefore, there is no social service greater than the job you are doing...

The company wanted only people who had acquired high qualifications in the art of Business Management. The manager of the department of raw material collection was one such person. Besides, he was well-versed in the esoteric art of human resource management.

"Not one of you has achieved the target given to you. Shameful..."

The manager's gaze was fixed sternly at each of the one hundred and fourteen tear collectors when he said that.

"You are getting reimbursed well and correctly for each drop of tear that you collect, aren't you?"

That was the major attraction of the job.

You must realise that the tear glands of the people have started drying up and you must work harder. You must rush to the spots where tragedies have struck. Your ability tells in meeting the maximum number of people and collecting their tears as fast as possible. Any great sorrow from losses and tragedies will be forgotten very quickly. Remember that it is only in the first moments of any tragedy that there will be tears...

How many journeys had he been on! He thought about it. Pilgrimages in search of disaster and tragedy and pain. The hot teardrops could not be allowed to fall on the ground. They had to be collected carefully before that and sold. The sharp eyes of the tear-collector, which never filled themselves, searched for only one thing—where could you find tear filled eyes?

He learnt to cultivate the inhumanity of a money lender as he collected the tear drops of those who were burning in terrible tragedies, the awful sorrows of personal losses, the hellish sorrows of disasters. He learnt to leave his emotions behind in his wanderings in search of the day's bread.

"Hungry..." one of the twins tried laboriously to lift his head and whimpered.

His wife looked at him. The fruits they had carried for the journey were all over.

"Just let's reach the next station, son..." he said.

The other twin lay on his lap unable to bear the terrible weight of his own head.

"That huge head is full of brains." His wife would keep repeating. It was since the doctor said that the children's brains were more developed than their age warranted that she had started this refrain. Both of them had started dreaming since then.

That the expanding heads would become larger and larger...It was the fate of children like these...They had forgotten that the doctor had also said this once. The fact that the heads were no longer growing so rapidly had given their hopes impetus.

The medicines were making them hungry, they were so strong. How many pills they swallowed a day. He was spending more than half his income on medicines already.

When tears became scarcer, journeys became more necessary. One day, when he returned from one such long journey, he had recognised that his mother had become a victim of Alzheimer's disease. Though he knew that it was nearly impossible to recover lost memories, he rendered his homage to duty and gave his mother an expensive treatment that held out a hope.

The Manager of the company gathered the tear-collectors who were struggling to meet their procurement targets for a conference and spelt out the new policy.

It was becoming useless to go in search of tears. So, we have taken the decision that we will manufacture tears in the company itself. We need working tear glands for that. What you have to do now is to bring people who have the capacity to produce tears continuously to the factory. We will make them stay here for a period of one or two years depending on their capacity to produce tears. We will meet all their expenses. If they stay here, we can medicate them to increase the production of tears. We can gather tears many times as the eyes fill up. We can use techniques to bring about the flow of tears. We can show them videos of tearjerkers. We can let sorrowful music flood the place. We can see to it that circumstances that provoke the flow of tears are always available.

The Manager paused for a moment. Then he continued in answer to the questions that shadowed the two hundred and twenty eight eyes which were fixed on him, "For the time being, we'll call them our tear-cows. You will be allotted targets of the tear-cows that each of you is expected to bring. There are attractive incentives to those who perform

well. But, if you are not able to get to the target within the time fixed, you will have to quit. There will be no mercy shown."

He ended the meeting there as though to emphasise that there was no room for further questions.

When told that all their expenses would be met and that they would be rewarded well, a number of people volunteered to be tear-cows. But quite a few were rejected in the medical tests. The main criterion was the productivity of the tear glands. A hundred and fourteen people rushed around the country in search of tear-cows, anxious about facing a jobless future if they could not meet the target on time.

He was not bad at rushing at all. The memory of the problems at home gave his legs strength which they did not possess and speed they could not aspire to. But all this only brought him close to the target. He was still one short.

As the time given for getting the tear=cows came near its end, he was rushing around madly in search of his last prey. Finally, he returned home in despair, did not eat, did not sleep, kept muttering to himself as if he was insane. His wife tried to console him, to calm him down.

"What's the point of your saying all this? Where will I get hold of another one? In another two days, everything will end."

"I have an idea..."

He looked a question at his wife.

"That one person you need to complete your quota—I can be that one."

He was shocked.

"You know how much I weep here. All that is being wasted now. If we could get money for each drop of that..."

"No, darling, not that."

"Yes. I'm the only one who can save your job. Also, I have stocks of tears to last a lifetime. If we convert that to money, we'll never have to suffer again. Our children will be saved. Mother's illness can be treated...."

They got down from the train, bought the children food, and reached the gates of the company by autorikshaw. It was the last day of the time granted to him to attain his target.

The twins were very happy as this was the first time they were going on a long trip. They laughed aloud looking around and enjoying the sights without lifting their heavy heads. They kept asking questions about the things they saw around them.

When his wife was taken away for the final scanning and other more complicated tests after the preliminary examinations, he was almost sure that she would be found suitable. With this completion of his target his job would become permanent.

He could see the tear-cows stand still like statues in the cell-like rooms nearby. All their faces looked as though they would burst into tears any moment. He was sure that the people he had brought along too would be among them. He and his companions had been seeking out all the sorrows of the land and imprisoning them. When all the sorrows had been imprisoned and all the tears had been drawn out... He dreamt vainly that only happiness and pleasure would remain in the land.

After a while, she came back, in the company uniform of the tear-cows, escorted by a couple of people. The uniform carried the number allotted to the new tear-cow. Her face had changed too. She looked as though she would burst into tears at any moment. She stood silently before him. The twins lay on his two shoulders. They where whimpering as though they realised that something unpleasant was taking place.

"Will my children be there when I return?" It was a whisper with the lips hardly moving. She caressed their heads as though she was a puppet.

One of the twins gathered up all his strength and tried to lift his head as though in a mad impulse. The small eyes which were straight for a moment saw his mother in full.

"Amma...," he sobbed.

Her lips quivered. Her eyes started filling with tears.

The woman who escorted her said, "Let's go..." It was time for collection.

He thought of his mother who had lost her memory, whom they had left locked up in the house.

"Let's go, children...," he said.

"If you wait a little while, you can take the payment for the first collection," the escort told him. And she extended a copy of the contract that had been signed by his wife to him.

The terms of the contract made it clear that the tear-cow could not return home until the last drop of tears from the tear glands had been extracted. The escort was taking his wife into the room by then.

He stood outside the glass cabin watching them collect his wife's tears. She was crying silently. As he and the escort watched, waiting for the first drops of tears, what fell into the collecting bottle was red droplets of blood-tears.

Translated from Malayalam by Prema Jayakumar

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Soni, Our Cow

Gangadhar Gadgil

Soon after my father was settled and earning in Mumbai, he bought some land in the village of Gondavala and built a house and re-established his connection with the rural background from which he sprang. He also bought a big pedigree cow in Bombay and put her in the cowshed. The house of a farmer and particularly a Brahmin farmer without a cow was like a woman without a Kumkum mark on her forehead. So Balgi, as the cow was named, gave the rural home a sanctity, an authenticity, which it needed.

The big cow was a quiet, well behaved animal, who it seems won the heart of all of the family particularly of the womenfolk in our house. Unfortunately she developed some ailment of the neck and died suddenly. I was too young when that happened. I therefore do not at all remember what she was like. But from the talk about her in the family, it seems that she was a very well-behaved cow. She never ate the foodstuffs my grandma spread out in the backyard to dry so that they could be stored to last for a whole year without being damaged. She was a big cow but never frightened anybody and particularly the woman and children in the family, with a hostile rush at them with horns aimed. And she was so considerate that she gently stepped aside if she found a baby crawling in the backyard. My grandmother, the most respected and important person in the family, remembered the cow with a great deal of affection. Balgi grew and at the same time became very gentle, as years elapsed. Grandma would tell me that Balgi the cow was as tall as a standing person.

I found this a little confusing. For my dad's head was much taller than my head or even my mom's head. So I asked as tall as whose head?

Grandma whose hearing had become rather poor often did not

hear the question or pretended not to have heard it. But sometimes she did hear it and said, "Oh well! Let us say she was as tall as that shelf over there." Well! When she said this she waved her hand in the direction of two or three shelves, that stood in the kitchen. But the trouble was each of them was of a different height. But I did not pursue the matter any further for I was more interested in making grandma tell me the interesting story of the cow. I had really heard it umpteen times, but grandma narrated it so nicely that I always wanted to hear it from her, particularly because it concerned me. But sometimes Grandma was too busy and did not tell the story. I however, so enjoyed listening to it that I waited patiently till she had finished her chores and then asked, "Grandma she was very well behaved wasn't she? I mean the cow, and she brought good luck to the family, didn't she?"

However, when grandma had finished churning the butter milk and extracted from it a goodly amount of butter, she had the time and the inclination to tell the rest of the story.

I don't know why, but she always found it necessary to lower her voice to a whisper, when she told us about nice things that happened in our family. Probably she did not want such stories of good luck to be heard by other people. That she believed would arouse their jealousy and make them inclined to bring harm to us. So when she lowered her voice to a whisper, I moved close to her. She then stopped depositing the butter in its earthen receptacle and said in a more lowered whisper, "You know what, the month in which we bought her and tied her in our cowshed, your uncle got a raise in his salary of no less than fifty rupees."

Grandma then nodded with a smile and said, "And your uncle gave me all of those fifty additional rupees, which he had earned." She then looked at me with a meaningful smile, "Let us see what you do when you grow up and start earning a big salary."

My grandma loved to have money, which she put in her brass container, and looked at it often with great satisfaction. However, when somebody got married or had a baby she dipped her hand in the brass receptacle and gave a little something to him or her. She was, however, more generous on special occasions like a wedding.

She wanted me to grow up and become a big powerful and highly paid officer like a Mamalatdar. Actually in those days a Mamalatdar's post was no longer the most highly paid post, that could be occupied by an Indian. But it was so when Grandma was young and it had remained so for her even in her old age.

Anyway I used to laugh secretly when she said so: For I had no

intention of giving my first salary to her or to my mom, or anybody else. I intended to spend it on buying nice clothes and sweets like expensive chocolates for myself. And I intended to be not a minor government functionary like a Mamalatdar but a barrister who, I had been told, shovel money into the capacious pockets of their black gowns.

At this point Grandma returned to the theme of the cow and fondly remembered how nice, considerate and well-behaved she was. She said, "She was really wonderful. I used to spread grains, and lentils in the backyard on a piece of cloth to dry them for storage. Those are a temptation for the cattle. But Balgi was so well-behaved that she never yielded to the temptation to eat them. She never ate the growing crops in our or our neighbour's unguarded farm. She even allowed the women in our house to touch and feed her. Even your aunt who is very timid gave her without fear the special evening feed which she was given while she was being milked."

If my aunt was around at that time, she protested and said in an angry whisper, which grandma could not hear, "Oh! I am timid, am I? If a cow threatens to gore me with her sharp horns, is it not wise to avoid being gored. Is one expected to let her gore and break one's bones!"

Luckily, Grandma never could hear auntie's carefully modulated whisper. She continued to sing the praise of Balgi, my father's first family cow.

She eventually reached what to me was the high point of the story. Grandma said, "Once when you were a crawling baby, you crawled and went straight under the cow between her four legs."

To hear that made me shudder. I wondered though how as a baby I could do anything so foolish and risky. I guess I was a very young baby then who could not understand anything at all, so I could ask Grandma. "How small was I then?"

"Oh well! You were as small as say this forehand of mine." For Grandma this was an unimportant detail, and she got preoccupied with seeing whether the churning of the butter milk, had produced butter, which was a very valuable product for the kitchen.

I, however, could not believe that I could have been at any time as small as her forehand, and I said, "Oh! No! I couldn't have been that small and stupid."

If Grandma paused in telling the story at that un juncture to attend to the important task of gathering the butter, I grew quite frightened and excited. For a while she paused the cow could have stepped on

me. So I urged Grandma to continue with the story and rescue me from the dire predicament.

But for Grandma that was an unimportant detail, She said, "Oh well, we don't know how long you sat there in between the four legs of the cow. But the cow stood quietly until we noticed what had happened and rushed to rescue you from underneath her belly."

I heaved a sigh of great and happy relief when Grandma said so. At this point Grandma would finish gathering butter from the churned buttermilk and I began to look longingly at the big ball of butter for getting my daily helping of it. But I did not want to show how keenly I was looking forward to getting it. So I asked Grandma. "And how much milk did Balgi give every time she was milked?"

Grandma would then pause for a while to select a pot that would correctly indicate the milk Balgi gave when she was milked. Then she pointed to a biggish narrow necked pot and said, "Well! Do you see that pot. It used to get completely filled when she was milked. Even a buffalow, who normally gives more milk than a cow, could not match her in the matter of giving milk."

Sometimes my mother used to be around when Grandma said this. She was in the habit of calling a spade a spade even when she was speaking to Grandma...She said, "Oh no! I have never seen the cow Balgi giving that pot full of milk."

Grandma did not like to be contradicted, she cried, "How do you know? When Balgi calved you had gone to your mother's house to have your baby."

This was promptly contradicted by my mom. She said, "Yes. I certainly had gone to my maternal home. But I returned in two months and then was here for three months and in those three months I saw every day morning and evening how much milk Balgi gave and it never filled fully that narrow necked pot ever."

My Grandma was not the one to take such back talk lying down. She retorted, "I am the one who handled the milk then as I do now. I used to warm the milk and then add a little buttermilk to some of it to make curd from it. And our Laxman everyday used this very narrow necked pot to milk Balgi and it used to be full to the brim. Sometimes the milk was just a little less. But it never was as less as you say it was."

At this point my mother being the daughter-in-law used to lower her voice but she could not bring herself to stop arguing. She said, "It was to me that Laxman handed over the milk, and the pot was filled only three quarters."

But although my Grandma was hard of hearing, her ears became remarkably sharp when she was involved in an argument.

So she heard my mother's retort, got up with remarkable alacrity and taking the narrow necked pot in hand, said, "Yes, Laxman used this pot for milking the cow and it used to be full to the very brim."

My mother though a daughter-in-law never yielded ground in an argument. She took the narrow necked pot from Grandma's hand filled it three quarters with water and said: "That used to be the amount of milk given by the cow Balgi."

Grandma would put her fingers in the pot and then express her sharp disagreement with an emphatic nod. She said, "Ho. The milk used to be much more. Why, I used to give you no less than half a seer of milk to drink when you had a baby."

This was enough to upset mom and she cried, "Good heaven. Poor me. Half a seer of milk indeed! All the milk I got to drink was a small cupful in the morning and an equally niggardly amount in the evening and even the small cup was not filled to the brim."

Mother's-in-law used to take pleasure in denying things to their daughter's-in-law in the traditional society.

Laxmi, my aunt, who was a part of our joint family, felt excluded from this entire argument. But she suspected that she was also being blamed and said, "Well! When Mother-in-law used to ask me to give the milk to you, I always used to fill the cup to the brim."

Grandma was happy to have Aunt's support in this argument and she said, "And was'nt it you Laxmi who was giving milk to Ambu every day."

Ambu incidentally was the name of my mother.

Luckily often at this juncture my dad or uncle came home from the offices where they worked. But if their arrival was delayed for some reason or other, the argument became quite heated. It hurt the feeling of my mom and aunt began to cry, while my mom banged the door loudly shut herself in a room and even at times banged her head on the wooden door frame as a punishment, she inflicted on herself simply because there was nobody else she could blame or punish.

All this goes to show the importance the cow Balgi had in our house. Yeshya our cowherd used to tell me that the cow Balgi was very affectionate and when we returned to Mumbai at the end of our holidays, the cow used to miss us and continually shed tears for nearly two to four days.

Balgi eventually gave birth to a female calf and my Grandma affectionately named her Soni, the golden cow. However, she was exactly the opposite of her mother. Balgi was quite tall. But Soni was small. She hardly reached the waist of grown up man. Balgi had nice curved

horns, while Soni had almost none. The two small apologies for horns, which she carried on her head, used to move back and forth if one touched them. She was almost a hornless cow. But she made up for this lacunae by being a nasty cow. Her nastiness was written all over her face, and she used to exhibit it whenever she got a chance to do so. She would eat up the grains and other foodstuffs my Grandma used to spread in the backyard for being dried in the sun. In fact, she used to peep into Grandma's kitchen and if she was not around, ate up even the food she served in the plates for us to eat. Although small in size she could jump across the tall fence that separated our neighbour's farm from our farm. She did so, if nobody was looking and ate up his crop to our considerable embarassment. Our cowherd was sharply taken to task by us and by our neighbours, when she did so and he used to whack her with a cudgel for her misbehaviour. But that did not deter her from doing so again, whenever an opportunity was offered. In fact, he used to give me a cudgel and incite me to join him in whacking her. He had told me that the big white bull with sharp horns, who was Soni's dad was a foul tempered bull and had foiled all attempts to yoke him to a cart. Why, he had even upturned or broken, the cart's to which attempts were made to yoke him. Yesheya, therefore used to pray to god to inflict an incurable disease on that bull. He wanted the same disease to be inflicted on Soni, she might be small in size and hornless but she ventured to gore big bulls and even buff slows and although she had no horns, she would gore strong big farmers, when they were not looking. She had decided, it seems, not to have any calves and give us milk. Atleast she had not done so until she was five year's old. Another cow in our stable had calved twice at the same age and given us potfuls of milk. But not Soni.

In our family, there were two sets of opinions, on what ought to be done with Soni. My dad was very kind hearted when it came to animals. He was also a great optimist. He hoped that however nasty Soni was, she would eventually calve as all cows do and give us atleast two pot fulls of milk every day in the morning and evening. In any case he was opposed to selling her off. For only a butcher was likely to buy her. Being a kind hearted man, my dad abhorred sending animals into butcher's clutches. After all we were Brahmins and Brahmins never killed or sold animals to butchers. Apart from being kind hearted my father was an incorrigible optimist. He felt that being a cow Soni would ultimately calve and give us milk. She, he used to say, would be a different cow, when she calved and became a mother. My mother used to share his views, as she was neither interested in nor knowledgeable

about cows. In other matters, she generally disagreed with dad, who, she thought, lacked worldly wisdom, as most women in India do about their husbands.

My uncle, who was a part of our joint family, was the opposite of my dad, in temperament and nature. He believed that Soni should be sold off before people began to suspect that she was a barren cow unlikely to calve and yield milk for the owner's family as horned cow should. Naturally, my aunt had the same opinion and even my Grandma seemed to lean towards uncle's opinion. Inevitably therefore, there were often heated arguments in the family over what should be done with Soni.

My dad loved to munch little tit bits during the course of a day, and he was munching freshly scoured raw coconut as he walked back and forth in our covered front yard. While he did so, he noticed our cow Soni grazing in the grassland adjacent to our front yard. Yeshya, our cowherd had tied a heavy piece of wood round her neck to ensure that she did not run and gore anybody. This was a precaution usually taken in our rural areas to avoid, ill-tempered cattle from rushing at and goring unsuspecting people. Soni was used to having such a heavy piece of wood tied round her neck, and she pulled it with her as she grazed hungrily. Sometimes it got entangled in her feet and she stumbled. I saw that and smiled feeling that she was getting her deserts.

But my kind hearted dad was outraged and protested "Who has done this cruel, inhuman deed? Are all of you so hard hearted as to do this to a poor animal that cannot protest. Yeshya! Where is that lad? Call him here and I will tie a heavy piece of wood round his neck. He will then realize how much suffering he has inflicted on a poor dumb animal."

He then looked at mom who stood in the covered but open lobby of our house adjacent to the backyard. He eyed her with annoyance and asked, "Where is that lad Yeshya. Have you sent him to run an errand and buy some household provisions from the grocer's shop as you are in the habit of doing?"

At that juncture my uncle came out in that lobby and said, "Ah! What is upsetting you? Oh. That piece of wood tied round the cow's neck. Well! It was I who told Yeshya to tie it. For, she is a nasty cow. Though small in size she jumps across tall fences, enters our neighbour's farms and eats their crops. She is quite a rogue and jumps across over fence when nobody is looking."

My father was not convinced, and was still in a bad, temper. He said, "Oh! How can she be so cunning, she is after all a mere cow,

not a clever human being. I think this Yeshya is a shirker. He must be going off somewhere or falling asleep when he should be tending the cattle. If she jumps into our neighbour's farms, don't release her for grazing and feed her when she is tathered in the cowshed. But don't do this to a dumb animal. This is terribly inhuman."

My uncle accompanied my dad as he moved forward, to untie the piece of wood tied round Soni's neck and said. "Please, listen to me and do as I say. Let us sell off this cow and get rid of her. We have to spend money on feeding her and listen to angry neighbour's complaints and compensate them for the damage she does to their farms.

Dad said, "May be she is nasty. But that does not mean we should be so unhuman as to tie a heavy piece of wood round her neck."

Soni seemed to understand what dad was trying to do and leaned down to facilitate his effort. But he found it difficult to untie the knot tied by cowherd Yeshya's strong hands. So uncle offered to help and untie the dumb cow. Finding Soni in a cooperative mood, I too took an opportunity to give a friendly, affectionate pat to Soni. After she was freed, dad fed her a piece of the soft and sweet coconut meat he was eating.

Thereafter we all were walking homewards satisfied with our kind deed. But when we reached the front yard, I suddenly found uncle flying in the air and then he fell down in an awkard heap. And thereafter I saw the cow Soni jumping around merrily.

My dad rushed to give a helping hand to uncle and asked with affectionate concern, "Goodness! Are you hurt badly?"

My aunt rushed towards uncle. She being a deeply devoted wife was almost in tears.

My Grandma sensed that something was wrong and rushed out to help uncle. My dad, helped uncle to limp to his room and lie down in his bed. I too wanted to be of help and tried to hold uncle's forehand.

But he pushed aside with annoyance. While helping uncle to get into his bed, my father said with angry concern, "I must say that this Soni is the nastiest cow I have ever seen. Is she utterly insane!"

Uncle pressed his paining waist and cried, "I have been saying all along, that this Soni is a very nasty animal. She cannot even notice and much less respond to the kindness showed to her. We should not look after her. Do arrange to get rid of her forthwith."

My aunt was furious and began to give vent to her strong feelings. She muttered angrily, "A mere cow and nasty one at that, I don't know why so much is being made of her. It seems in this house people care

more for a nasty cow than for members of the family." She then rushed to uncle's room, with a bottle of suitable oil for massaging his paining limbs.

My mom quietly resumed her household work with a guilty feeling. If my father did anything wrong, she, a dutiful and devoted wife, shared his guilt.

My Grandma was furious and came out in the front lobby of our house and loudly gave vent to her feelings. She ordered our cowherd Yeshya not to give Soni even an armful of stored grass to eat. She said, "This is the nastiest cow our family has ever owned and we should get rid of her as soon as we can."

My father and uncle were dutiful and obedient sons in the traditional world and generally did not do anything that Grandma did not like. So my dad sat aside all his kind feelings and told Yeshya to find out if anybody wanted to buy that cow. But feed her a bundle of cut and stored grass. "If she has a pinched and starved look nobody would buy her." He said.

The households in our village and even in the neighbouring villages had experienced the nastiness of Soni, and nobody was inclined even to glance at her. Let alone buying her. They hoped that the cow would be sold to some far off buyer. So nothing happened for the next couple of weeks. Soni, whom we did not want, was very much with us, making as much of a nuisance of herself, as she was used to do.

When we were in this unpleasant predicament, Yashya once called aside my dad and informed him in a solemn confidential voice, "The cow is lowing for the last couple of days."

Dad conveyed the information equally solemnly to uncle and even Grandma in an equally solemn voice confirmed that she too had heard the cow lowing at night.

I knew that as horses neigh, cows low and goats cry Ba ba. So I did not understand why lowing of Soni should be regarded as a very important piece of information. I asked my mother the question, but she avoided answering it. She considered me too young and foolish to be given this adult piece of information and scolded me saying, "Why must you want to know everything? You will learn all this when you grow up. Go out and play in the yard with other kids.".

Later on Yeshya took two rupees from dad and after tying a rope round soni's neck took her somewhere. He returned only after a lapse of four hours. And since then all talk of selling off soni suddenly ceased. Grandma's feelings towards her underwent a sea change and she began to feed her not only grass but more nourishing feed and reminded Yeshya

often to give her plenty of stored grass to eat. He patted her kindly and even uncle who was not in the habit of smiling and cutting little jokes, said to me, "Well! It looks as if you kids are going to feast on tasty milk of a newly calved cow."

This development encouraged my dad, who was disinclined to sell Soni, as she was only likely to be bought by a butcher. He asserted over and over again, "Well! I knew that she would calve this year, and that is precisely what is happening."

Everybody had to reluctantly agree with him and I was amazed at how my dad always proved to be right.

Later on when in the next school vacation we went to Gondavala, I found that Soni's tummy had become considerably enlarged.

My dad, an incorrigible optimist and a kind hearted man was pleased and said, "Well! I was right when I insisted that we should not be in a hurry to sell her off."

He then asked Yeshya to buy a sackful of special, nutritious feed for her, and she began to get large helpings of it everyday which she ate with great relish and lowed for having more of it.

Even grandma had now become hopeful of the cow calving and tied round her neck a thick thread blessed by Lord Ganapati in the nearby temple to ward off the effect of envious glances.

Uncle was still not convinced that the cow would really calve and give a big pot full of milk and said shaking his head, "Well! I still have my doubts that her udders will yield a decent quantity of milk. She is stingy when it comes to giving."

My ever optimist dad asserted, "Oh, I am sure she will give a goodly quantity of milk. Don't judge about that by her small size. Even small animals do yield a goodly quantity of milk." He would then look at her enlarged stomach and try to guess when she was likely to calve.

My mom was as usual supportive of dad in such matters and said, "Goodness Me: Her tummy has become enormous. Now let us hope she gives birth to a big healthy bull."

My aunt was less knowledgeable in such matters as she hailed from the big holy town of Nasik and not from rural Konkan.

But our household hailed from rural Konkan and they all laughed that such a question should at all be asked. I joined in the laughter. Though I really didnot know why a male calf was preferable to a female calf.

That derisive laughter annoyed aunt and she said, "Oh, I was brought up in a town and therefore I am not as knowledgeable as you are but do tell me why it is preferable that a calf should be a bullock rather than a cow."

Uncle tried to explain things to her. He said, "A bull is useful all the time. He can be yoked to a cart or a plough and meet such daily important needs.

Aunt said, "But a female calf yields milk, doesn't she?"

Uncle could not satisfactorily refute this observation so he said, to aunt, "Oh! You just don't understand."

This evoked general laughter and aunt walked away in a huff.

As for me, I was quite confident that Soni would give birth to a little bullock and I and our cowherd Yeshya decided on a name for the stale calf. That pleased me so much, that I jumped around crazily as I had seen calves do.

I went so far in making my imitation realistic, that I trampled the things my Aaji had spread out in our backyard to dry before they were stored for the wet months of monsoon. I even tried to jump across the fence as calves sometimes do and in doing so I twisted my foot. I went so far as to try to buz at mom's head. The result was quite a few angry whacks on my back which were very painful. I then gave up the efforts to jump and prance around like a calf, and engaged in happy speculation of the large quantity of sweet milk. I would insist on claiming from mother and I expressed my expectations in this matter to mom and warned her angrily that I ought not to be given anything less than that. I said all this to mom, when grandma and dad were around so that they should also know what was very much on my mind.

My mom was very much happy about the turn events were taking and she would ask dad in grandma'a presence whether Soni would yield milk that would fill to the brim the big thick and narrow necked pot, we had for milking.

Dad would eat a piece of one of the raw sweet potatoes which were stored in the kitchen and observe, "Yes. She certainly would if she is fed nourishing feed."

Grandma with her long experience had her own reservations in the matter. So she said, "I hope so. Let us see."

She didn't like to express the misgivings and tempt misfortune. Moreover if the cow had given plenty of milk, she could have distributed more butter milk to the poor women in the village. This would have added to her merit in the account book of Chitragupta the divine accountant.

My mom was very assertive. "Well! Soni is ill tempered no doubt but very often, such ill tempered animals give a lot of milk."

This annoyed aunt, who shared uncle's misgiving as a devoted Hindu wife should and said, "One thing is certain. She is a very ill tempered

cow and likely to be nasty in every thing she does including yielding milk. In any case, I am not sure it will be easy to milk her. She may administer nasty kicks to anybody who would try to milk her.

Dad wouldn't enter into an argument with aunt in this matter. Men in the family were expected to ignore such kitchen talk in a dignified manner, particularly when it came from the wives of other members of the joint family. So he went out carrying with him the sweet potato, he was eating. I would follow him out in an equally dignified and supercillious manner.

At last after making us wait for nearly half a month beyond her due date, Soni calved. But in keeping with her nasty nature, she chose a Saturday to do so. Saturday is the day of 'Shani' the deity who generally brought misfortune. This upset particularly the women in the family, who were always prone to express their feelings in the matter. Grandma frankly expressed her misgiving and cried, "Oh, she has lived up to the nasty nature and of all the days in the week, she had to calve on the most inauspicious day of the week. Couldn't she have waited for a day and calved on a Sunday, which is an auspicious day. Now to keep her in the cowshed may bring misfortune. The proper thing would be to sell her off. But after all she is a cow born in our own cowshed, and the only one at that. Well! The least we can do is to invite our family priest and ask him to chant the Sanskrit prayers to appease God Shani.

What made matters worse was that the calf was a cow and not a bullock.

It was only my ignorant aunt, who had been brought up in a town, who was happy that the calf was a cow, that would eventually add to the milk supply in the kitchen.

My dad was optimistic as ever. He said, "It is good that the first calf should be a cow. It will ensure adequate milk supply for the kitchen in the years to come." He then felt with his hands Soni's udders to find out how thick they were so as to gauge the milk they would yield.

Soni was licking her calf. She was also eating the nourishing and delicious feed she was given in a big iron container.

Grandma had a long experience of cows calving and she was advising on the feed that Soni was to be given and the care that had to be taken of her and her calf. Our cowherd Yeshya was partially running around carrying out the instructions given by various persons in the family. He cleaned the milk pot till it shined.

Grandma asked her daughter-in-law to wash the brass container in which Soni was to be milked. It was to be spruced clean and dry.

My mom rushed to do this and washed a bigger container than what grandma had instructed to do.

Uncle took that container and went to the cow to milk the cow. He was particularly good, at milking cattle. My dad noticed him, proceeding to the cowshed and followed him there and said, "Don't milk her in the stale stuffy atmosphere of the cowshed. Do it in the fresh cool air of our backyard. That will put the cow in a happy mood.

Grandma was against this. She said, "Don't milk the cow in the open, where people can see her being milked and feel envious."

She then told the story of how the cow in her mother's house was milked in the open and how the evil envious eyes of neighbours had turned the fresh milk into mottled blood.

But dad was adamant. He said, "Nonsense. Nobody's evil eye will do any harm here. Oh! These old beliefs and misgivings! Let us say good bye to them."

This greatly added to my respect for dad. My mom gave him an admiring look.

Uncle yielded with poor grace. For he had great affection for my dad, his brother. Yeshya then brought the new born calf, which could hardly stand on its legs and walk. Soni followed her calf with affectionate lows. She was very proud that she had calved and given birth to a little calf and she was not happy that Yeshya our cowherd was carrying it. So when Yeshya placed the little calf in front of her, she began to lick it clean and dry with her rough tongue.

Yeshya then brought a big helping of special feed for her and she began to devour it in large mouthfuls with relish. Seeing the relish with which she was devouring it with big gulps I put a little bit of it in my mouth. Well! It wasn't at all tasty to my tongue.

Grandma didn't like that the cow should be milked in the open. So she quietly retired to the kitchen. But she was none the less very keen to see the cow being milked.

When the cow was tethered to the trunk of a big strong tree at the edge of the backyard, Yeshya brought out a big pot full of her favourite feed for her and she began to devour it in big gulps with relish. Dad then asked that the calf should be released to suck the taught udders. But the little calf was very foolish and could not quite locate the udders and did not quite know how to suck them. That made me laugh but I restrained myself in view of the solemnity of the occasion.

Yeshya tried to help the calf by catching hold of an udder and pushing it in its silly mouth. But the moment Yeshya's hand touched her udder, Soni jumped and kicked at Yeshya. It not only hit Yeshya but also the stupid little calf.

My Mom and aunt had slowly stepped out of the lobby of the

house facing the backyard. But when they saw Soni kicking wildly they stepped back into the lobby in a hurry.

Uncle who had stepped out with the big narrow necked containers to milk the cow too stopped and decided to be cautious. He was obviously annoyed with the cow and did not seem to relish the prospect of milking her.

I was standing close by to watch Soni being milked and the strings of milk falling into the narrow necked pot held expertly between the two knees by my uncle. He gave me an annoyed look and said to me, "Why are you hovering around here? Go back in the house. The cow is pretty nervous as it is. And if you children crowd around her, she will become more edgy."

Uncle then boldly advanced towards the cow to uphold his renoun of being very skilled in milking cows.

My aunt did not like the prospect of uncle being kicked in the face, as he tried to milk the ill-tempered cow. She cried, "You would better not milk her. She is a nasty cow. Let Yeshya milk her. After all he has tended her since she was a calf."

Yeshya was keen to have a go at this hazardous task. He had almost lived with cattle since he was a toddler. So he was not afraid. He said to my uncle, "Give me the pot. I will milk her. She is used to me and I am familiar with her temper and habbits."

Uncle did not want to acknowledge that he was no longer confident that he could handle the hazardous task of milking the cow. He said to Yeshya, "Pull away the calf, after it has had enough milk. I will then milk the cow."

Auntie was scared and annoyed. She said, "Oh! Why must you be so stubborn. It was only the other day that the nasty cow almost gored you. Let Yeshya handle this task."

"Will you stop nagging me," cried uncle with a frown on his brow.

"Oh well! I would better go in the kitchen and not see what is happening. "She pouted with annoyance and went inside the house. She angrily summoned my little cousin who was also watching with interest the exciting episode. She made him lie down next to her and made him shut his eyes very much against his will.

My mom therefore felt that it was also incumbent on her to admonish her child. She said to me, "And why are you meddling in these hazardous going on? Come here and stay close to me." Their children were the only persons that daughter-in-law could scold in the family.

I stubbornly refused to obey my mother and got prepared to get

an angry slap on my cheek, when she got hold of me. But that would be later.

By this time the calf had learnt to suck Soni's udder and was no longer afraid of being kicked by its mother.

Dad said, "I think she is now ready to be milked and the calf has had enough milk. I don't think she will kick if we tried to milk her."

Uncle was not convinced that Soni was ready to be milked. He said, "I think she is not quite ready to be milked yet. Let the calf suck her udders a little longer."

Dad said, "Give me the pot. I will milk her."

He was always an optimist and in a hurry.

Uncle did not want to be shown to be a coward. He advanced and after the calf was pulled away by Yeshya gingerly touched Soni's udders. Soni suddenly got nervous and stood tensely. Uncle waited for a little while and then gently sqeezed one udder. When he touched the udder, Soni jumped in the air and let loose an avalanche of kicks. The pot used for milking got a big dent and was kicked out of uncle's hands. Another kick hit uncle sharply on his upper arm. He was in considerable pain and stood up holding tightly his hurt arm cried "Oh what a terrible nasty cow she is. I have not seen a more nasty cow in my whole life."

Aunt rushed out and said in an angry tearful voice, "So, what I feared has happened. I wonder why nobody ever listens to me." She obviously had a lot on her mind and wanted to say more. But when she saw how angry uncle was with her for being right, she stopped short and disappeared in the kitchen.

My dad, ever the optimist, picked up the pot in which Soni was to be milked and moved forward to milk her. He said, "What does she mean by refusing to be milked. We have brought her up and given her the best available feed. She should have at least an iota of gratefulness for all that we have done for her."

My uncle warned him. "Better be careful. Her hoofs can break bones. I was unwittingly moving forward. Mother admonished me and cried "Why are you meddling there? Do you want to get hurt and add to my woes."

My father with his usual optimism and confidence caught hold of one of Soni's udder.

Soni immediately unlashed a storm of kicks. Dad, however, was careful after seeing what had happened to poor uncle and escaped being hurt. He was, however not willing to give up and again gingerly reached

for the udder and Soni again almost flew in the air as she unleashed another avalanche of kicks.

Yeshya was familiar with the character traits of the cattle in our Konkan. He said, "She will never let herself be milked this way. We will have to tie her hind feet and also administer a few whacks on her back."

Dad being kindhearted as ever would not initially accept this inhuman suggestion. But eventually he agreed to accept the suggestion after having experienced not fully but a little bit the sharpness and hardness of Soni's hooves. So Yeshya brought a strong rope and tied her legs so tightly that she could barely stand. He moreover tied her firmly to the big strong wooden pillars of our cowshed. Soni now was unable to unleash the shower of her kicks. But she could stubbornly refuse to yield any milk, which she did. So various efforts were made to make her release milk from her udders. My grandma made the usual offering to Gods to seek their blessings and undo the effects of envious eyes on Soni. Soni was given another big helping of her favourite feed, which she promptly gobbled and lowed to ask for more of it. My dad rubbed affectionately her long neck and she very happily raised it and asked to be rubbed more and affectionately licked with her prickly tongue dad's hand. She allowed the calf to suckle. But when dad tried to milk her, not a drop came out of her udders.

Yeshya said, "The cattle and particularly the cows in our Konkan are very cranky and contrary. If she is administered sharp blows, she will come round and start yielding milk."

Uncle who was not at all happy with the cow but still could not bring himself to accept the idea of whacking a newly calved cow. He said, "Oh no. Don't whack her. After all she has calved only today."

Grandma said the same thing. "Oh no, don't do that. She is the first calf born in this house of ours. It doesn't matter it she does not yield milk today. She will do so tomorrow and for many more days to come."

But dad was quite annoyed with the nasty and perverse cow. He hit her hard several times with the thick cudgel he carried with him when he moved outdoors in our country farmland where one was likely to run into snakes and vicious cattle. So hard was she hit, that her back bent under the strokes and the surprise effect was that Soni, who was not yielding milk so far began to yield it. I actually saw and heard threads of milk falling into the milking pot.

I rushed forward to see what seemed to be a miracle and I eyed my dad respectfully while he was busy milking the cow. But this did

not go on for any length of time, in spite of dad's vigorous efforts, the strings of milk stopped falling in the container and Yeshya cried, "Oh, goodness! That seem to be all the milk she had in her udders."

There was not even a drinking glass full of white milk in the big narrow necked pot, which Grandma had hope fully given for milking the cow.

Dad pursed his lips, looked at uncle and nodded and uncle too gave him an equally disappointed look.

Yeshya could not help bursting into laughter. He gave the pot to Grandma and cried, "Grandma here is your cow's milk."

Grandma peered into the pot and not being able to see any milk with her weak eyes, dipped her fingers in it. The fingers did not reach the milk. She dipped the palm of her hand and at last it found some milk at the very bottom of the pot.

She cried, "My goodness! Is this cow's milk or the milk of a cat."

This was the end of all my dreams of eating nice sweet Kharwas made from the first few day's raw milk of a newly calved cow.

But Soni seemed to be happy over the milk she had yielded and lowed over and over again to demand more of the delicious feed, she liked and which she felt she had rightfully earned.

Translated from Marathi by the Author



Cities on the Shore of the Ocean

Himanshu Joshi

Yes, that day too, some wisps of shredded cotton were scattered in the clear, blue sky—floating gently in the air. The chilly sunshine felt sweet, good. Everything around felt good. Clean, washed! Open and full of enchantment!

I was gazing at this new world, full of wonder.

I don't know how, lost in talk, we had wandered so far! Yesterday Ingrid told me that in the evening, after wandering for a while on Caljuhan road they had set off in the direction of Sogsawan Lake—Nora, Ina and Rolf. The place was full of wild strawberry bushes. They had their fill of the sweet-sour strawberries and didn't forget to bring some back for their friends too.

She had held out a small brown bag to me and when instead of thanks I said, "*Thuzan thuk*," in Norwegian, all of them burst out laughing.

I don't know why I felt that you didn't like this. When I offered the open bag to you, just to be polite, you picked up a small strawberry to taste, and returned the rest.

"Strawberries are not always so sweet..." Ina was saying when Ole Peter cut her short, "The touch of Nora's slender, delicate fingers must have sweetened them." Laughter swelled again, sounding like numerous loose coins suddenly scattered on a stone floor.

Nora clapped and laughed for a long time.

This deserted end of the lake appealed—because of its unspoilt beauty. Such greenery, such a clean blue sky, such clear water, so much bright, washed light. Spellbound, we moved on impulsively. When we had walked for a while, our tired feet searched for a resting place.

You said, chirruping like a little girl, "Oh! Oh, that corner! Next to the crooked birch tree...in front of that big white rock..."

There were rugs of soft green grass spread out. How wonderful it felt walking on that spongy sward—a tender, joyous sensation!

In the midst of the greenery, at the edge of the lake, a rough white rock reclined like the back of an elephant. Three sides were immersed in the water.

"Let's sit here," I said, as if talking to myself.

When you said, "The water's very deep..." I looked at you and said playfully, "All the better. It'll be easier to drown."

In response, you kept quiet. I noticed—you were pressing your silken lower lip with your teeth. You were staring at me unblinking; your round marble-like blue eyes roving like those of a cat about to spring.

When I stroked your scattered golden hair gently, suddenly you smiled.

Holding each other's hands for support, when we jumped carefully on to the rock and sat down, I gazed astonished at the scene around. A green forest of birch and deodar had spread its arms as far as the eye could see! Trees that touched the sky, countless rays of the chilly sun sifted through them to shimmer in the water. The silent water gleamed like mercury in some places, while the sun's rays sprang like white sparks when they touched it.

Many trees had descended into the water to bathe, floating along with their leaves and branches, turning the green water greener still. Beneath the trees, their mirror images. The azure sky's cerulean reflection. Slender branches shaking in the wind, sharp needle-thin leaves shivering. It seemed as if the sky, earth and water were different dimensions of the same picture...no, the same dimension, but the reflected images of a multiplicity of pictures.

On the right, on the slope of a hill, some colourful shadows were flitting like butterflies. That constrained, quiet noise was overpowering in this silence. Little by little the sounds closed up—sounds like laughter and talk. Perhaps some children were picking wild strawberries. Perhaps they were singing in high, unrestrained voices. It was a screaming sound like a guitar playing—fragmented! An off key instrument!

At that very moment you gently threw a stone in the water and a ring began to stretch out on its own. Who knows what kind of search you were embarking on, when you peered into the mirror of that continuously growing circle.

Because of the light shimmering in the water, numerous forms were taking shape, shapes like the cast-off skins of snakes.

Wary of getting wet, I rolled up my right sleeve slightly. When I put my fingers in the water, waving them about, its icy chill stung like a scorpion bite.

"Oh!" I immediately removed my hand.

"Why, what happened?" you asked, looking at me wonderingly.

"It looks as if there are lots of water snakes in the lake. I think one of them has bitten me."

"Well, it must have been a female. It must have found your blood sweet." You looked at me roguishly.

I got a little annoyed.

"Shall I cut my finger, will you taste it?"

I hadn't finished speaking when you chirped, "Am I a snake?"

"You're not a snake, but a fairy, a water nymph. Cleopatra of Egypt." Your eloquent eyes began to sparkle. As if they were smiling.

True, I was talking to you, but thousands of questions hung on my eyelids. My gaze roamed all over, searching for something, even as I was speaking to you.

"What are you looking for?"

"I'm hunting for the other corner of the lake. I'll look for a few more. And finally I'll find one from which all the corners of this lake are visible..."

"And what'll happen then?"

"Then what shouldn't, will happen..."

"You mean?"

I was quiet for a few moments. Then breaking the silence, I said, "In my country, rather, in a mountainous area of my country, there are many lakes. One of them is called Naukuchia Lake. In other words, a lake with nine corners. It is said, anyone who catches sight of all nine corners from the same spot will either become a king or die."

Perhaps you didn't like what I said. Without coming up with some deep, philosophical response, you said casually, "Kings are not in vogue any more. And as for the other possibility, you're welcome to go. Look for ten, not nine corners. I'll sit here waiting for you till judgement day."

"Tchch! You didn't understand. I don't want to die or become a king myself. I just want to turn you into Cleopatra—the Empress of Egypt."

You suddenly burst out laughing.

"So, will you hand over the whole of Egypt to me? What will poor Hosni Mubarak do?" You continued, thoughtfully, "You don't know much about Cleopatra. She was a very spirited soul. You wouldn't be able to take it..."

Fine strands of tall grass had shot up to the level of the rock. I plucked one or two mechanically, divided them into bits and began to throw them into the water. They floated on the placid surface of the lake.

For a while there was silence between us. Perhaps you too were counting the trees looming before us.

Then like an impish child, you flung another stone in the water, in the same way.

A silver-coloured fish sprang out of the rock, slipped into the water and disappeared.

"How many more stones do you have?" I asked. You rubbed your palms to dust off the mud and said, "That was all. No more."

I continued to chew on the damp blades of grass, kept pulling them apart and throwing them into the water, lost in thought.

"Well, Bahira, have you ever seen snow on the mountains?"

"No."

"Does it snow in Cairo?"

"Not really."

"It falls in the mountainous regions of our country. We have the high Himalayas there..." I turned silent.

"What do you want to say?"

"I was telling you about the fishes..."

"But you were talking about snow."

"You're right but I'm not wrong either. I wanted to say something about both." I looked at you and said, "You may not consider this to be true, but fish swept along by snow fed rivers from the mountains into the plains, sometimes melt like wax in the scorching heat and dissolve in the water."

You burst out laughing. "Impossible! That cannot be true. I've never heard anything like that..."

You were gazing at me with that same expression of disbelief. Keeping your eyes fixed on me.

"It's very common. Doesn't it happen in your country? When you return, go to the mouth of the river Nile on a hot afternoon and you'll find a mass of melting fishes..."

You suddenly covered your satiny face with the colourful silk scarf, printed with a scene of the pyramids. You laughed so much that you became breathless. Oh God...!

Now I lay on my back on the huge rock and examined the tops of the deodar trees with apparent interest. The silky white clouds, which had divided themselves into fragments, floated lazily in the blue sky.

You too were silent. Who knows what you were searching for so curiously, in that enchanting scene, which you had gathered into your expressive blue eyes?

With an air of mystery, you tried to read the emotions that had

scattered themselves in my eyes and whispered slowly, "You have beautiful eyes, you wicked fellow. They're fascinating enough to drive anyone mad."

Now it was my turn to be amused.

I exploded with laughter.

"Oh, I didn't know you composed poetry too."

"Why are you bringing poetry into this? Isn't the simple truth enough to describe something real? I'm not speaking in riddles here. I'm just narrating plainly what I felt, what I experienced. I can't talk like you..."

Then you spoke again, breaking the silence that lingered for a few moments. "I've forgotten everything after coming here. My past, my present, my own identity..." As you said this you became very emotional. "I couldn't ever have dreamt that the world could be so beautiful. The world that I had seen so far was my whole universe. That there was something beyond that, other horizons, was far removed from my imagination."

Your slender, delicate fingers moved slowly, mechanically on my head, creating new circles, the heat of their vibration...the sensation of your breath.

My eyes began to close on their own. I felt as though, little by little I was losing consciousness. Then suddenly, two burning drops of dew fell on my forehead and I came awake. "Oh, you're crying, Bahira?"

It had been such a long time since I came to Norway but I hadn't yet been able to completely absorb my surroundings. It felt like a different world. Neither was day like the day I knew nor night like the night. A kind of brightness seemed to pervade each moment.

When the sun shone during the day it didn't feel like sunshine. It seemed to merely bear the colour of sunshine. A yellow light, but devoid of warmth.

In India one gets a sense of the season or whether it's day or night through the light outside. When it begins to grow dark one's steps turn homewards on their own. When it's morning, it means it's time to wake up. Time to settle into one's daily routine.

But not only the economics, the arithmetic of this place seemed different. Here, the vibrations of the needle of a clock measured time, not light or darkness.

When I told you what had happened the day before, you began to giggle like a little girl.

"Didn't you look at the clock?"

"I did. But I looked at the sun shining outside too..."

"Then..."

"Actually I had made a plan to meet an Indian friend at Maystua at eleven o'clock."

I described the incident at length—

I was tired. Was lying in bed reading something. It was a little cold outside. God knows when my eyes closed, and I fell into a deep sleep. When I heard the phone ring, I woke up with a start. Then I looked at the clock and saw it was already ten. Even if I got ready as fast as I could it would be difficult to reach Maystua at eleven.

All the same I quickly got ready. Flung clothes on my body and hurried to get to the station. The wooden stairs creaked louder than ever, as I raced down. Suddenly the Yugoslavian watchman ran up to me. "Is everything OK?" he asked in his broken English.

"Everything's fine. I had fixed up to meet someone. I have to get there in time..."

"What time had you arranged to meet? During the day or night?"

"During the day!" I said.

In response he said, "But my dear sir, it's going to be eleven at night right now."

I gazed at him surprised. "What, it's night right now?"

There was pale sunlight outside, like there was during the day. Though there was not much activity, I could hear loud voices clearly. On the slope of the park opposite, people were enthusiastically demonstrating their closeness, without any restraint. This pleasant aspect of their culture might have appeared odd to us but it was perfectly normal here.

Some young couples were strolling on the tender green grass beneath some distant trees.

I didn't know what to do when I got back to my room. I had received some letters from India. I thought I might as well reply to them. But my pen just wouldn't move.

That day I'd bought some colourful picture post cards with beautiful scenes from Norway on them, while returning from the market. Scenes of the shining midnight sun. You had chosen all of them. Sledges moving through the snow—drawn by dogs and reindeer. Polar bears!

More than half were those you had selected but forgotten to take. Ever since I arrived, I had been longing for darkness. Darkness has its place in our lives, the way light has. I faced this truth for the first time, after coming here.

In the evening you said, at dinner time, "I called home just now and spoke to Abira. I told her, since we're close to the North Pole, the day is six months long here and the night six months too. At this time it's day..."

"Then how do people go to sleep there, with the sun shining? You'll fall sick in that environment," she said, worried.

"Oh, they put thick curtains on the windows and doors. People get accustomed to the surroundings they live in. Isn't it?"

"That's true." When I said that you turned serious.

Then I remembered an incident that had occurred a long way back. Iwata Son had come to India to learn Hindi. He was staying in Delhi. It was summer, the season when the blisteringly hot 'loo' blows, something never experienced in Japan. He wrote to his mother that a scorching wind was blowing during that time, so hot that sometimes birds fainted and fell off the trees.

A few days later his mother sent him a frantic letter, saying, "I'm sending you a ticket. Return to Japan as soon as you can."

When I narrated this to you, you began to laugh. "If you had your way, you would send me back to Cairo by the next flight."

"Who could be a greater enemy of yours in this world than me?"

"Yes, that's absolutely true."

There were more than a hundred people there, from America, Britain, Nigeria, Japan, China, Israel, India and Egypt. They were to stay in this international institution for one and a half months. We had arrived on the twenty fourth of June. Three weeks had flown past without our realising how they had gone by.

"There's a plan to go for a trip to Kagrera day after tomorrow. Will you come?" you had asked, very affectionately.

"No, there's something I need to do, that is more important."

Perhaps you didn't expect such an indifferent response. You gazed at me, as though stunned into silence. Then you said with some acrimony, "Last week you didn't come to Yutin Hyman either. May I ask why you decided to come here? You can catch up with your reading back in India too."

Why I decided to come here, I didn't know myself. I wanted to say that but kept quiet.

After a few seconds I broke the silence, saying, "Next week we have to go to Telemark. I'll come along then."

You left in a huff, without a word in response.

I found you standing before me; bag in hand, on the third day after this incident.

"So early?"

"Yes, it is early! What are you dreaming about? Hurry up and get ready. The bus is waiting. It'll leave at 9.15. You know, in Norway a quarter past nine means exactly fifteen minutes past nine. Neither a second more, nor less."

You went on chattering and all the while you were stuffing my

towel, brush, soap and other such objects into the empty bag that had hung on the peg in front of me.

"Are you crazy? I didn't put my name down for the trip. How can I...?"

"Don't worry. I went to the office and wrote it. What are you thinking about? Hurry up, you lazy..."

"Sometimes I feel that you are seized by fits of insanity. One never knows what you might do when!"

You scattered my things all around.

You flung my shoes and socks in front of me and said, "There are only four minutes left."

God knows when I put on my shoes, locked the door. When I leapt down the stairs. When we crossed the road and reached the crossing where the bus stood. The last announcement had already been made. There was a guide who was supposed to fill each moment of the way with his chatter.

The automatic door opened suddenly and we had barely stepped into the bus when its wheels began to turn. My eye fell on my watch and I saw that it was exactly 9.15.

"If we had been one minute late the bus would have left," you said, wiping the sweat that spurted on your face despite the cold. "I wouldn't be surprised if I had a heart attack, and all because of you."

You were furious but I was smiling playfully. "Well, at least that would prove that you possess something like a heart."

In response you smiled helplessly, and said nothing.

It took three and a half hours to reach Kagrera. You let me have the window seat.

"Why?"

You didn't speak, just gave me a look that said all.

The guide was speaking into his mike, telling us about the places we passed.

"This is the town of Drummon. It's one of Norway's important harbours. It was settled in the sixteenth century. There is a paper mill here."

We could see apple orchards nearby. At one place there was a board saying—'Horse Farm.'

"You said that back home you have horses, in your farmhouse. If you wish we could buy a couple of horses for you."

You smiled faintly at my tomfoolery, but didn't speak at all.

We never noticed when we passed the towns of Hocheson and Larvik. Now and again we glimpsed colourful ships riding at anchor,

in some places a whole flotilla of diesel powered boats, swaying in the waves that kept battering the ocean shores. Large logs, lashed together floated about. From far, from very far it seemed as if somewhere in the incessantly blue water, mats/rivers were floating.

In some places you could see rows of vegetables growing in long, domed acrylic greenhouses, to save them from the cold and frost.

There were arrangements for food in Kragera and we were allowed a few moments to rest. But we neither ate nor rested.

We gazed all around awestruck, at the panorama—the host of little islands stretching on and on.

I strolled on far ahead all by myself. When I returned I got the impression that you were waiting for me.

"So you've seen all of Kragera? Did you leave anything out?" you remarked, with more than a hint of sarcasm.

I replied in the same vein, "I did leave something for others to see, but yes..." As if I'd suddenly remembered something, "A thought struck me. Let's buy two or three islands. They'll be dirt cheap."

"What'll you do with them?" you asked eagerly.

"Well you can make pyramids for these people. Norwegians don't have too many such monuments. They can use them to attract tourists and earn their living."

Everyone laughed at this.

Lara, who was from Brazil, said, "Why don't you construct a Taj Mahal?"

"For that you'll have to die first. It has to be a monument in your memory!"

They all cracked up again.

To cap my comments, Kim Jong from Korea said, sounding concerned, "But from where will you get mummies to put in the pyramids?"

Someone said, pointing towards the elderly Romanian Vionova, "She probably will be of use some day!"

Everybody burst into loud laughter.

The islands of Kragera accompanied us for quite some time. Some were quite large but others so small that children could have raced from one end to the other quite easily.

You stayed by my side like a shadow, dumbly gathering the scene into your dreamy blue eyes, your gaze full of wonder.

Now we had to walk to the island that lay before us and climb up the lighthouse to get a view of the magnificent vista. This was the southernmost point in Norway, the very last extremity.

A large number of ships were cutting through the enormous waves of the ocean, travelling south to become smaller and smaller and finally disappear. Others turned their faces eastward and faded away.

Suddenly something occurred to me. Gazing at you, I asked, "You've heard of the Gulf Stream?"

You looked puzzled and seemed lost in thought for a while. "I've definitely heard of the Gulf countries—but no, not the Gulf Stream."

"You really are something, Bahira..." Then I composed myself and continued in a calmer tone, "Close to where we are standing, in the ocean, there is a huge current of warm water, which keeps flowing constantly towards the icy lands of the north. Because of the warmth of this current the shores of Norway do not freeze in winter. This permits free movement throughout the year. Isn't it amazing?"

When I laughed, you too, responded, with your pure, guileless laughter.

How many emotions made an appearance all at once, in your transparent eyes, coming and going, like sunshine and shadow.

The whole island was covered with large white stones, smooth and rounded. I picked up a small one and said, "They must have rolled here hundreds and thousands of years ago in the Ice Age. Swept along by the glaciers. See, how smooth they've become!"

You took the stone in your hand and gazed at it unblinking. Then you gently gave it back.

When we walked ahead, I noticed—you had selected two smooth and pretty pebbles from that heap and put them in your purse.

I kept wondering, what would you do with those stones? Would you take them with you to Cairo? Would you display them in your drawing room? Present them to a close friend as a souvenir from Norway? Or would you take them as a gift for your two children or keep them hidden somewhere as a memento of this trip? Some time...

We were walking along silently. As if turning into a heap of stones ourselves. How different the landscape seemed here, from what we glimpsed from the top of the lighthouse!

"Isn't happenstance another name for life itself?" It was as if you were asking yourself, while addressing me. "It's quite likely that we'll never view these sights again in this life..."

We were progressing, slowly and mechanically towards the point where our travelling companions stood chatting. They began to pick up their bags in their hands or sling them on their shoulders.

"They're waiting for us, perhaps. There are only five minutes left for the bus to leave."

Our feet moved faster. The others formed a queue and began to board the bus.

Blown about by the breeze, the Israeli Nora's hair began to gleam even brighter, touched by the golden rays of the sun.

All the others began to seat themselves in the same places they'd occupied earlier.

When I saved the window seat for you, you refused it, shaking your head.

"When we went to Thoyan yesterday, you said in the train that you find the window seat more convenient."

"That was in the train..."

I understood your feelings perfectly. Why you were saying that, for what reasons, even the deeper sentiments behind it.

I began to search in the shifting scene outside the window for the equivalent of that which was taking place within me, in a different form. Little images were acquiring new dimensions. Like a curious child you were trying to carefully store away all that seemed beyond your understanding.

Such a large country! Such a small population! How did people pass their lives in these desolate islands? Particularly in winter, when it must all seem even more deserted and isolated.

Quite likely, the national flag hanging in front of each house acted as a landmark, so that a newcomer who got lost could get his bearings easily.

As we crossed mountains, far spread forests, rivers, waterfalls one by one, it was hard to estimate where we were going—in which direction.

Last night's events roamed my mind still. The air had been festive. People sang songs from their countries. Shared interesting titbits. Some played musical instruments. The atmosphere brimmed with enthusiasm. You had sung an Egyptian folk song. The audience listened, spellbound. You translated it for us into English, "Fish dwell not only in the sea or rivers, but also in the burning sands of the Sahara. Stars shine on the earth too. When you live on in my memories, how can you ever die? You exist without being present. Yes, in my breath, in the air, like a fragrance, you are everywhere."

Later, while introducing you, the rector of the institution Prof. Flatine mentioned, "You were listening to a song sung by the well-known Egyptian folk singer Bahira Shafeek."

Though I had known you well for such a long time, this piece of information was new to me and very delightful.

For a long time, I gazed at you mesmerized; you had an exceptionally melodious voice.

"Why is it," you had said, looking at me, breaking the silence, "that the further we move away from our own land the closer it feels? Why have those pyramids that seemed mere heaps of stone there, acquired a different identity here, aroused new sentiments? Why do they seem to belong much more to me? Why does the water of the Nile seem clearer, purer? The feeling of holding nectar in my cupped hands..."

Somewhere inside, you had become very emotional.

While you were saying this, I recalled the rivers of my own country which were turning into filthy drains and dying...

I changed the subject and asked, "Where did you study music?"

"I've just practised a little. In the entire course of my existence, I have never been able to find time to relax, to simply sit and unwind." You said this as if you were searching in a vacuum, as if you were telling yourself something.

"When your husband is so well employed, is connected with such an important institute in Cairo, why do you wear yourself out working day and night? You were telling someone that day that you've never found such solace and peace as you have here."

You were silent for a long time, plumbing some inner depth. Then you peered out of the window and said, "All of us carry our own crosses on our shoulders. To bear them, to continue bearing them till our last breath, that's our fate. Don't you feel that way?"

I remained silent. You were quiet too. There was no sound other than that of movement of the bus. No horns were heard either. To blow a horn here is considered the equivalent of the rudest abuse. Very strange.

"My husband lives separately, with his other wife." Your sinking voice seemed to be coming from inside a well. "I have two children—Abira and Sahil. Whatever my life might be, I exist, but I have only one wish, to help them achieve something. Abira wants to be a doctor and Sahil an engineer..."

You extended your hand, showing me a silvery bracelet on your wrist. 'Abira' was written on it in the Roman script.

"It was Abira who called day before yesterday at night. She was saying that it snows a lot in Norway. Don't go out in the open at night. Last time when you went to Algeria, how ill you were when you returned!"

"The children are very loving. They take such good care of me. Sahil says, 'I'll get through in the very first entrance exam, Mummy! I'll

build a big house for you in Cairo when I become an engineer. We won't live in Luxor then...' "

Your words appealed to me greatly. How early such children mature, who have to face difficult circumstances!

"The bus will stop for only fifteen minutes here. There are arrangements for tea and light snacks. We will set off for our final destination at a quarter past five." After this announcement, the bus suddenly came to a halt. A circular platform had been built here. One could get a view of the magnificent vista surrounding us from it.

Hills behind hills. And hills behind them. Several layers of hills glimpsed together, which shaded into a faint blue and at some point, became one with the horizon. The way the azure softly faded away, made it all appear like a painting.

You had already taken out your camera and captured some scenes without my realising. Then you held it out to Joseph, who was from Ghana, and said, "Please, a picture of the two of us together..."

Joseph took two photos.

"I'll send them as soon as I reach Cairo." It seemed to me that you said that just for the sake of saying it.

The sunlight was paling.

The wheels of the bus were turning again. Most of the people held white plastic glasses full of hot tea in their hands. They were sipping it while savouring the scenes outside.

Someone put on a cassette of Japanese music. Apart from the two or three Japanese in the group, none of us could understand what the singer was belting out in a shrill voice.

We could see groups of sheep by the wayside here too. With long shaggy coats. Rounded horns.

"Do these sheep just wander around on their own?" you asked. "I can't see a shepherd accompanying them?"

"Yes, they don't have shepherds here. The sheep roam about independently in the woods."

"But lions, tigers or some other fierce animals..." you said, looking at me with the naively, like an innocent child.

I couldn't help laughing at your naiveté.

"There are no lions or tigers in these forests. Of course, sometimes hyenas or wolves that have fled from forests from neighbouring countries can be seen...for two or three months these sheep live on their own

in the forests. Then when the time comes, their owners herd them back into their folds."

It was evening when we reached Telemark. Not evening the way we know it. A kind of diffused light spread itself like a fog.

We were to spend the night there. So one by one, we all got down with our luggage. Rooms had been booked in the guesthouse.

After a wash and change, the whole group began to gather around the dining table.

"In Norway people have their dinner so early that sometimes one begins to feel hungry at night," you said, wrapping a red and yellow silk scarf around your neck.

"You can pack something for a snack at night, the way other people from African-Asian countries pick up sandwiches, bottles of milk or fruit from the kitchen. The market is pretty far from Willindren."

People were forming groups to go out sight seeing. Norma came to call you, but you said you had other plans.

"Do you intend to just sit here? Let's go and visit some place nearby!" Your voice sounded heavy, weighted.

I was tired, didn't feel like going out.

Then Norma came and laughingly caught hold of your hand and took you away. I saw that Alma too was standing there close by. You had to go, though you had no inclination for it.

Norma was your roommate. She had plans to visit Egypt the following year on some project. For this reason she was taking advantage of your presence to gather as much information as she could.

It was no use just lounging around. So I took out some newspapers from my bag and began to read them. Because I was returning to India via England, I had to make arrangements for my stay in London beforehand.

Some lines of national news, some from the provinces. It surprised me that there was no space, even marginally so, for news from India or other third world countries in Norwegian newspapers.

I put the papers away and went out. Where was I to go? What should I do? It was hard to decide.

With my sweater flung over my shoulder, I wandered around aimlessly and landed up somewhere quite far.

When I glanced down from the top of the hill that was as flat as an elephant's back, there was something frightening about the sight.

The river lay there like a serpent. There was something else there that had the look of a tiger. Perhaps it was the powerhouse.

I lay down on my back in the shade of the dense fir trees and gazed at the clear sky, searching for God knows what.

That day when we were returning from Aker Bregge, I found you strolling around alone near Churchill's statue.

"I had come here to find out about my plane ticket," you had said.

We had gone back by train to Billingdren.

Soft green grass carpeted the slope in front of the guesthouse. A few benches, here and there. We sat down quietly.

Yes, you were telling me something about yourself, in detail, "We stay at Luxor which is close to Cairo. We have our ancestral house there. Do visit us if you ever come to Egypt. I can show you the whole of Cairo in just two or three days." You paused for a while and said, "The pyramids are very close to Luxor. It's worth seeing them. You'll enjoy it..."

It seemed as if you became a little emotional while saying this.

"Like men, women too are known by their father's surname in our country, not their husband's. It feels a little odd when you address me as Mrs. Shafique. Shafique is not my husband's but my father's name..."

When you looked at me smilingly I felt a little embarrassed. "I have been calling you by this name all the time."

The expatriate Indians, who were my friends in Norway, had all become your friends too.

Just then the sound of some people talking and laughing close by startled me.

What did I see—you were standing there along with Norma, Ginny and Arne.

Arne was of Norwegian origin but settled in Canada. Being of Norwegian origin, he cannot pronounce the word 'Joshi' correctly sometimes and says 'Yoshi'. I can't help laughing and he immediately gets embarrassed. Yesterday he was calling 'Chawla' 'Sawla'.

We stood there and chatted for a while.

The sight before us was terrifying. Turn by turn, we gazed down at the deep valley, which seemed sunk in the nether world or at the snowy mountains touching the sky.

Arne said, "Tomorrow morning the bus will take us down into this valley first and then we will touch the top of this snow capped mountain. You'll be amazed to hear that while digging this mountain, ice that was hundreds and thousand of years old was unearthed."

They begged you to sing a song, but you waved their pleas aside. Arne had to play the guitar. It was time to depart so they all left.

In the end I realised I was the only one left—all alone.

All sorts of thoughts passed through my mind, Egypt, India and ice that was hundreds and thousands of years old, and Kagrera.

Then your voice shattered my reverie. When I looked up astonished—you stood there laughing, like a statue.

"Don't you want to go home? Do you want to spend the night here?"

"Do they have anything like night here?" I said, after some thought. "And what do I have to do there, in that clamour. It feels so good here, the atmosphere's so open, so quiet. Come, sit down..."

You sat down like an obedient child.

"You haven't got a letter from home recently?"

"I got one from Abira. Sahil called yesterday."

"Aren't you longing to go home?"

You continued to gaze at me mutely.

I kept lying on the grass like that. A moon rose above the snow capped peaks, like a sandalwood tika. Its icy-cold, silky rays were scattering like a fog. The river gleamed like a streak of mercury.

The faint, pain filled, melody of your humming surged and ebbed through the deserted, silent air. Like the deeply felt sensation of a smouldering ache.

I don't know how long I lay there, inert.

And you kept searching for who knows what in the void, with your sad eyes.

We barely noticed how soon the days passed.

There were so many things to preoccupy us on our return to Oslo.

One day Harry came along in a great hurry. He said, "We're making a plan to go to Tramso. Would you like to come?"

"Tramso...you mean—" I asked, after some thought.

"Inside the Arctic circle, till the town of Tramso. Possibly right up to the border— Finmark in other words. Boats don't go ahead of that. The boundary of Sweden begins there."

"But as a New Zealander won't the Antarctic Circle be closer for you?" He burst out laughing when I said that.

When Harry, Nora, Mona and a few other friends left one day, it felt as if the whole lively group had disintegrated.

That evening you came in such a rush that you were practically panting. "What are you doing sitting here? The Mexicans have organised a musical evening."

I didn't respond to that. I was absorbed in my book. You snatched it from my hands.

"Vikings..." you said, making a face. "You can read this pirate tale later."

There was a sense of urgency in your words. I said calmly, "Sit down for a while. Hundreds of years ago many of these Norwegian pirates went and settled in England. There is a good percentage of their stock in the present British population."

A little surprised, you began to laugh. "Why are you bothering yourself with all that? And yes, I forgot to tell you. I called Abira this evening. She said that Sahil had got admission in the engineering college. I was a little worried about how he would fare. Abira's very level-headed. She'll complete her medical studies in two or three years."

I said, with a laugh, "What good news! You should give us a treat, throw a party."

You handed me your purse quietly, saying, "Just leave a few dollars for taxi fare for when I reach Cairo. All the rest is yours. Spend it however you wish."

For a long time the purse cowered in my hands like a frightened bird. Then I returned it, saying, "Keep it. I'll throw the party."

You clapped and said, "Ah, that's very brave. We'll celebrate this weekend."

But before we could do that some other plans cropped up.

"Harry, Mona and all have gone on a trip to Tramso. I didn't know or we could have gone too," you said, as we strolled on the lawn after dinner.

"If you are that keen to die you don't need to go that far. We can find some easier way here."

When I said that, you flared up. "Did all the people who went there earlier, go just to die?"

"They know better about themselves, but I can put it down in writing that you won't return in one piece."

A number of circles were drawn on the calendar hanging in your room. You would ring each date with a red pencil, once it had passed. Only a few dates were left unmarked.

That day, I was sitting in my room working, when the phone rang. "Bahira speaking. Some more of our companions are going to Tramso tomorrow morning. I've booked two seats along with them, through Saga Travels. Get ready. I'm coming over in a little while."

You put down the phone hurriedly.

I was taken aback!

What a strange, crazy girl! It was not easy to reach that inaccessible region without preparing yourself properly. People who suffered from high blood pressure had to be particularly careful. She should have asked me at least, before making those plans.

After a while you arrived, panting. You had large paper bags in both your hands. You dumped them on the sofa and began to wipe your brow.

I looked a little stern.

"Sorry," you said, and began to laugh.

"I didn't want to go to Telemark, and you too were not prepared to. But when we went, we enjoyed it. This excursion to Tramso will be good fun too." You came and sat down close to me. "In any case we have to leave on the sixteenth. This is an opportunity, the very last opportunity. Who knows if we'll meet again in this lifetime? So don't make a face. Get ready..."

I felt a little ashamed. If I had to go I might as well go with good grace. Nothing should happen that I might regret somewhere, some time later.

I noticed that you were quietly packing my things in my bag.

"Your socks will be dry by the time we leave."

You had washed them and hung them in the bathroom.

You'd bought a few things that we might need for the journey.

We met several of our acquaintances at the station.

The moment she set eyes on you, Norma came and hugged you.

"You didn't tell me!" she complained and you replied with a list of all the things that had kept you busy.

Lemer Sylvia from Germany, Luskakhov, the Russian and the Brazilian Carlos were standing close by. Carlos was a good singer. He had studied in Cairo for some time. You had come to know him quite well. You stood there chatting with him for quite a while.

There were many vacant seats.

When the train set off you came and sat on the window seat opposite. The day before, you had bought an English guidebook from the market. You began tracing the route we were to take. In between your eyes kept wandering towards our luggage that was placed near the door, at some distance.

There were open shelves for passengers to place their luggage close to the door. People would leave their stuff there and sit in their berths.

"How far will this train go?" you asked, pensively.

"Till Budo, which is close to Lodingen. That's the last station."

"When will we get there?"

"At eleven, tomorrow morning." I had the timetable with me, the guidebook as well. They contained all the necessary information in full detail.

"I was asking because," you said, "our baggage will lie there unprotected all night. Passengers get on and off at each station. If someone steals something..."

"Ssh!" I put a finger on my lips. "Speak softly! People don't steal here, the way we do. You can sleep without a care. We'll take all our luggage down at Lodingen." You were gazing at me astonished, doubtful, filled with disbelief. Your eyes gleamed more than ever.

We had to change trains at Tranheim. It was half past ten at night when we were done. You bought some more solo, chips and other eatables.

"Are you planning to set up a shop?" I guffawed.

You replied in the same tone, "Yes!"

"In Norway or Cairo...?"

"Both!" Everyone laughed.

Cutting through inaccessible mountains, the train hurtled ahead. There were countless rows of hills. Tunnels through them. Tunnels and tunnels.

"Our trains don't go so fast even in the plains," you said, looking out curiously.

You saw herds of reindeer for the first time in your life.

"Why is there a wooden fence along the railway track?"

"So that the herds of reindeer don't collide with the trains!" Raya replied. She was from Russia. Such scenes, such an environment was to be found in the snowbound areas of Russia too, she said.

Snow covered mountains! Dense forests! Fjords! A faint light, or a slight sensation of darkness.

The train kept running on and on headlong, amidst that desolation.

The travellers were trying to sleep—some were nodding in their seats. I dozed off a couple of times too, but your eyes were fixed on the landscape outside, spellbound.

Then God knows when, my eyes shut by themselves, and I fell asleep.

When I awoke with a start, I noticed that all our fellow travellers were in the grip of a deep slumber. You too, were fast asleep.

I looked at my watch and saw that it was three o'clock. When I peered out of the window, I was transfixed.

Multicoloured lights were rising like a mist and floating in the sky. One after another, like waves.

When I woke you up, you were sleeping soundly. You came awake with a start. I gestured to you to look outside, so as not to disturb the others.

You rubbed your eyes and tried to take in the view. "Oh, what is this? Where are we?"

There was a view of a harbour. A board said, Moyzen Fjord.

"These coloured clouds."

"They are known as the Aurora Borealis. You can see such lights in the polar regions," I said.

It seemed as if the train had come out of the tunnel and was racing on the plateau on the back of the hill, as if it were eager to climb up into the sky.

Then suddenly the train stopped and came to a complete standstill. There was an announcement, "Now you are entering the polar circle. Welcome to the Arctic region."

The passengers were overcome with excitement. You giggled like a little girl.

There were some more announcements. I put a finger on my lips to tell you to be quiet.

"Between the seventh of June and the eighth of July you can see the sun shining at midnight."

When the train journey ended at Lodingen, I said, as we were getting down, "Bahira, why don't you check your baggage!" You looked embarrassed but didn't say anything.

We got down from the train and drank some tea. The sea was before us.

"Do we have to travel further on the sea?" you asked. I just nodded in assent.

A bus stood in front of us. All the passengers boarded it. "Are we to cross the sea in a bus..." "Wait a bit. Everything will soon become clear."

The bus started off and after travelling a short distance it entered the bowels of the large ship standing before us. The passengers got down and began to stroll on the deck of the ship.

When we reached the opposite shore, the bus came out of the ship on to the road—en route to Hasta.

"I never imagined in all my life that I could visit a place so snow bound. Coming to Norway has been an extraordinary experience for me." My eyes were fixed on your face when you said this. Your lips had turned blue with the cold.

I had an extra pullover. When I gave it to you, you refused to wear it.

"You'll need it..." you said shyly.

"Oh, I belong to an ice-cold area in the Himalayas. You won't be able to bear this bitter chill! You might even freeze into a mummy. The Norwegian government might have to build a pyramid to keep you safe till eternity!" Everyone was laughing but you were glaring at me, full of suppressed anger.

We had to leave for Bergen by ship around twelve. From there we would visit Tramso and Finmark.

When the ship arrived at exactly twelve o'clock, we had finished nibbling at the snacks that constituted our lunch. The ship was heated, so it was a relief for everyone to get inside. Snow, water, fjords, forests. Huge, desolate landmasses! The ship progressed, slicing its way through the water.

I took everyone up to the deck.

Turning to you I said, "Look, that day in Kragera I was talking about the Gulf Stream, it flows from there up to here. Then it goes ahead to Tramso, Finmark, where it ends."

A white seagull, that looked much like a pigeon, was flying over the endless waters, screeching harshly. When it got tired, it would return to perch on the ship again.

You were gazing into my eyes, searching for something. You murmured, "I'm glimpsing this extraordinary world for the first and last time. That's why I want to see it through your eyes..."

"You'll see nothing but sand, and burning sand through my eyes. You must have seen the Sahara desert. You'll find such scorching-broiling deserts scattered everywhere, whose heat one has to bear on one's own. This greenery outside is real, but when it remains nothing but a mirage, then..."

"You mean this reality is not real?"

"Of course it's real. An individual manages to traverse all the dry, sandy oceans of his or her life on the boats of these momentary mirages. As they keep you company through the course of your existence, these passing pleasures sometimes prove to be the greatest truths..."

You burst out laughing, in your simple, easy way.

"Don't you feel fearful, looking at these vast, desolate regions? Don't you feel terrified? How do people manage to survive in this endless void?"

In reply you kept gazing into the emptiness.

After a while you broke the silence, saying, "Over here, even this desolation gives me a lot of solace. Sometimes I think, if I could have my way, I'd bring everything here—my house, my children, my city, my river Nile, my pyramids, and spend the rest of my life in peace." You said this as if you were speaking not to me but to yourself when you voiced it aloud.

I smiled faintly and said, "Aren't you carrying it all with you wherever you go? Don't you know that there is far more energy in the imagination than in reality? There is nothing more real than fantasy."

A chilly, icy wind was blowing on the deck. You were shivering, your teeth chattering. Your hand was freezing—as cold as ice, when I touched it.

"Let's go down. We'll have some piping hot coffee."

Just then Raya came along, searching for something.

The restaurant was full. Most of the passengers on the ship were elderly Europeans. They were roaming about restlessly, as if searching for some kind of peace.

When we reached Tramso, the heatless yellow light of the sun had turned even more faint. After it had helped us disembark, the sun turned further north and vanished somewhere among the snowy mountains.

"The ship will take us to Hasta when it returns from Finmark," Raya was saying.

The bus was standing outside.

All the tourists boarded it. The conductor was playing the role of a guide now.

When we reached the top of the snow covered mountain with the help of the ropeway that stretched towards the sky, we discovered an even more extraordinary world there.

"This is Lapland. The natives of this place are known as Laps or Samis. When we go a little further we'll find sledges drawn by dogs. Some pulled by reindeer too. Their snow covered houses..."

We found a few houses built on snow. A settlement of Laps. Smoke rose from them. Close by were sheds for the reindeer. Fierce, bear-like dogs were barking, straining at their leashes.

The visitors' bright, colourful clothes made them stand out even at a distance, marking their difference. Little by little, a celebratory mood built up in that snowbound wilderness. Raya was crooning some tune. When, after much persuasion she broke into a Georgian dance along with the song, the onlookers began to sway to the beat. When we asked you, you refused to sing. I don't know why you were so sad inside.

"You won't be in this company again or in these surroundings, see anything like it. These moments can become a happy memory. Come on, sing an Egyptian song, the way you did that day."

You couldn't refuse my request.

Drawn by the beauty of your song, some Laps came out of their houses to join us.

It had turned so cold now that it was becoming impossible to stop there much longer.

They waved to us, saying, "Haday!" We too turned and waved back together, with hands that were numb and blue.

We were standing at Tramso harbour with our respective baggage. The ship coming from Finmark was an hour late.

The question was, how were we to pass the time in the minus fifteen-degree chill? We were surprised to find that there were no arrangements at the harbour.

Close by, there was a glass-enclosed telephone booth. We turned towards it. There was only enough space for one person. I said, "You stay here for a while. I'm just coming."

When I returned, I noticed that your eyelashes were wet.

"Why? What happened?" I asked, surprised.

"I phoned Abira and told her that I was calling from the northernmost point of Norway in the Arctic Circle. And that there was snow all around. That there was a strangely uplifting atmosphere...I was just saying that, when she screamed, 'Mamma, have you gone crazy? You've forgotten! What did Dr. Hamid say when you were leaving for Norway? Now you won't return alive from there. I knew it, that you'd make such a mistake...' She burst out crying loudly."

I said, my tone full of anxiety, "If that was the case, first of all you shouldn't have come here. And once you had, you shouldn't have called. You could have called from Hasta yesterday or from Ewen Shayar."

I forced you to put on my thick, cloak-like, woollen coat.

When the ship arrived in a short while, it was as if we'd come back to life.

The vessel was heated. Everyone collapsed on the sofas in a state of semi-consciousness. We asked the engineer to turn up the heating a bit.

Little by little the green of the leaves began to turn. Trees, forests, and mountains—all were changing. The mountain that was covered with green earlier, began to slowly turn yellow. In a few days, all of nature would be bathed in red.

To see the leaves take on the colours of flowers was an experience in itself. We felt it more deeply while returning to Oslo from Tramso.

The time to return was slowly drawing closer. There were only three days left now.

One evening you came to the reception searching for me. "Sorry, my ticket has not been confirmed for the sixteenth. I'll have to leave on the seventeenth morning now. The flight from Paris to Cairo is full."

"This guest house has been booked only till the sixteenth. It'll empty out on the sixteenth," I said, in a worried tone. "Will you stay here all alone?"

"It's possible that someone else might turn up, with a similar problem. When I went and told them about my predicament at the office, they said that I would have to pay from my own pocket for the one extra day. I'll pay..."

I had noticed that as the time to leave was coming closer, the look of sadness was deepening in your face. You appeared lost, drifting in who knows which world of your own.

The business of making plane reservations, shopping, was already in motion.

"Setneki Agnes of Hungary has invited all those who went to Tramso for a party. Aren't you going?" When you said this, I turned and put the same question to you, "Aren't you going?"

"I don't feel like going anywhere," you said, ending the yawning silence. "OK, let's go to the sea shore. You haven't taken me out for coffee for a long time. You've become really stingy."

I didn't say anything, just smiled. Somewhere inside, you found this irritating.

"I really enjoy sitting by the sea at Aker Bregge. Watching the colourful ships come and go. The seagulls flying on top of the waves, touching

them now and again. Squawking loudly as they circle the sky! Let's meet them once more...!" You sounded distracted.

"You must be having seagulls there in Egypt too," I said, doubtingly.

"There must be millions and billions of women, but is there another Bahira Shafeeq in the world? Everyone doesn't have an substitute."

Folding my hands apologetically, I rose, "Come, your excellency, let's go to Aker Bregge. Come and meet your seagulls. You will not see them again."

You strolled along chirping now, almost as if you were flying. The heaviness dragging at your face was no longer so pronounced.

After having coffee in the restaurant, you said, "Come, let's sit out in the open, we can look at the sea and at the seagulls too."

There were four or five large statues in the circular park in front of the Town Hall—of a mother and her little children—all nude! But there was nothing offensive about them. The tender expression of maternal love on the mother figure's face seemed to provide a new dimension.

"Didn't you write anything here?" you asked, looking at me.

"Haven't you seen, the way we've been running around from morning till night? Every night there's either a cultural or literary evening or a party which goes on till late..."

"Okay, tell me, will you write a story based on these experiences?"

"Perhaps..."

"And what will the ending be like?" you asked, with child-like curiosity.

I was silent for a very long time. You kept watching me intently, trying to read the play of emotion on my face, which changed from moment to moment.

"There can be two kinds of endings—one happy, one sad!"

"What'll happen in the sad one?"

"When we part, you'll say in a choked voice that the mummies placed in the pyramids thousands of years ago were wrapped in muslin produced in India. When you get back, please send me a length of white cloth similar to it. Before I die, I'll state that it's my last wish that I should be wrapped in that cloth when I'm put away forever. That fabric will be my last garment..."

I noticed, that as I was moving ahead, you were growing more and more serious.

"OK, in the happy one..."

"In the happy one you'll be chirping with joy at the prospect of going home. You'll give me a send off party. And when we leave you'll

come up to the airport and say good bye with a smile, with the words, 'See you again!'"

I left Oslo one day before you did.

Neither of the two endings came true at the end. Two weeks after reaching India, I received a brief note from you.

"I have only wept aloud on two occasion in my life. The first was when President Nasser was assassinated. The second—when you went away and I was left all alone in the haunted guesthouse!"

Translated from Hindi by Deepa Agarwal





Maid

Pradip Bihari

People say this girl's character is not good, she doesn't work whole heartedly anywhere. She would work properly for two-three days and then she would be absent. She has an array of reasons to explain her absenteeism.

All colony dwellers know about her. Already, she has worked in most of the households. About her, most housewives hold the unanimous opinion, "Keeping her is similar to rearing pigeons."

First, her sister came to work at my place. She was the elder one. Perhaps she worked for a week. Then she stopped. My wife had said to her, "Call your parents. You are young to talk about money."

But her sister kept dilly-dallying and didn't turn up.

She had come three days after her sister left the work. My wife said, "She won't let her work because she doesn't have a guardian."

My wife doesn't keep well. For the past six years she is living with a maturing pain in her backbone. Despite so much of medication she hasn't improved. Pain keeps playing hide and sick but doesn't disappear. It almost takes her life away when it strikes. At last the only safeguard is to refrain from bending. Physical work catapults the pain. Sweeping and mopping are pain-causing for her. Hence, a maid is essential at my home.

The Girl kept standing. My wife asked, "Why hasn't your sister come?"

"Her brother-in-law came at Durga Pooja and took her to her in-laws' house."

"Your parents" my wife said, "why don't they come?"

The girl said, "I am not a thief. I have worked with many households. Ask them. In case you hear one complaint, you can chuck me out."

"The complaint is, she would work for two days and not for four consecutive days."

"This won't happen now," she said in a committed voice, " I work only in a few houses and I'll come twice a day."

I thought this 'one-inch-tall' girl won't be able to attend to the whole of the household work. I said, "Even she can't handle everything well herself."

She said politely, "I can do all that. Chores, sweeping...mopping...washing utensils everything."

I saw myself calculating the money part. With a pause, she said, "Alright, work. But I won't pay you more than one hundred rupees."

"No, this is not good," in a grey voice she said, "because of the work in this house, I have left work at other places. They were paying less. Now, I only work in the corner house of Mr. Jha." She stopped and again said, "Others have motor to draw water but here there is only a hand-pump."

My wife thought that the girl had a point. "Okay! Work. After satisfying myself with your work I will pay you a hundred per month. Work properly. It should be absolutely clean. And yes..." with a small pause she said, "DSP Saheb is my husband's friend. Even if one spoon gets missing, you will be punished."

She listened to everything.

I thought...this 10-11-year-old girl won't be able to do the whole of the household work.

She started working. She used to come twice daily, early in the morning and at four in the afternoon.

One day I asked my wife, "Why does she come so early?"

She said, "after the morning chores, she goes to school. Secondly, it's a help in the morning as you also go to office during that time."

Now, one thing was added to my wife's schedule. Everyday as I returned from the office, she would say something about the girl. Sometimes I liked it and sometimes did not.

One day, my wife said, "The girl stares at things. Her behaviour is not acceptable. I advised her to be careful."

That day as I was shaving, I heard it. My wife was shouting at her, "I asked you to mop and you are watching TV. Go and work."

Silently, she picked up the bucket and went to work. My wife would often get angry at her. One day she said, "She speaks more than she works."

"What?"

"Without reason, she questions."

"What does she ask?" I said.

She said, "You have an old washing machine. Nobody keeps this model now. Did you get this free?"

I felt bad. I said to my wife, "Be serious. Let a servant be like a servant. If you give her the liberty, she would speak nonsense to you. You should not talk anything else except about work with these servants."

"Not only this..." Wife said, "She was saying, are you satisfied watching this portable black and white TV? Why don't you buy a colour one?"

My wife decided, if the girl keeps talking like this, she would ask her to leave. But immediately she recalled her pitiable backache and deferred her decision.

Another habit I dislike in the girl was that, whenever both of my sons would sit to eat, she would constantly gaze at them. Whenever I saw it, I would stop her, and she sneaks away. Then she would loiter around and again come back. For this reason alone I shout at her.

She left school and now started staying at my home longer. When I asked my wife, I found that earlier she used to get a mid-day meal at school and that was why she continued. Now, it has been stopped, so she had left school.

I had returned from office. The girl was standing on the verandah in despair. I went inside and asked my wife, "What has happened?"

She burst out, "Today this dwarf girl has done what is beyond my tolerance. If she is so fond of then...."

I felt that, she refrained from saying bad words about her. I asked, "What had she done?"

"What wrong she can do more than this?" she said, "She was applying my make-up on the dressing table...and...."

"What and...?"

"And after that she touched up her lips with the lipstick."

I didn't say anything.

"Because of this, I have slapped her today."

"At least now your anger should disappear."

"How can it?" My wife said, "I told her I will not keep her anymore. She said, she would...."

"What?"

"That she would leave the work in all the other house but yours."

"Why?"

"Other people give me stale food, here I get fresh, hot breakfast," she said. While saying this, my wife went to see her in the verandah. I also went there.

The girl was not there.

It was the festival of light — Deepavali — that day. The whole day she stayed at my home. Kept doing tidbits of work. On festivals housewives have more work to do. Her presence was a support. She knew everything about the kitchen.

The sun set. She made a paste of rice. My wife painted an *alpana* at the entrance of the house. The girl was surprised. Excited, she said, "You draw *alpana* in an absolutely different way." In a country vein she said, "Here *Lashmi ghar Dariddar Bahar* is not written in the manner as you did."

All through the day, both my sons distributed sun-dried crackers. The elder one said to the younger, "Give me more crackers and you keep the phuljhari. You will not be able to crack bombs." But the little one was not to agree. At the end he could manage to get half the share of that.

I saw the girl was roaming around my sons.

Before lighting the oil lamps on the festive evening, her younger sister had come to call her. But she didn't go. She replied, "You go. I will come after taking prasad."

Evening turned to night. The prayer got delayed. Again her sister came to call her, "Come! Bhaiya has come. He is looking for you."

Hearing about her elder brother, she reflected fear. Quickly, she got ready. She said to my wife, "My brother has come. I am going."

My wife bid her farewell for the day. She gave her some eatables. She said to her, "Prayers have not started. You come tomorrow, get the utensils back and take your prasad."

The girl went to the verandah. In a mime her younger sister asked, "Did they give you crackers?"

By way of answer, she made a face and said, "That is what I had been waiting for, so long. Had I got some, wouldn't I have been happy to share them with you?"

Translated from Maithili by Pranav Bihari



My Mamu's Daughter

Rohini Muthuswami

Up the Kollimalai hills, an arduous two-hour climb away from Perungudam village, about two hours drive from the district office at Dindigul, is a small hamlet. Up there, the sky is the palest blue, green trees dot the horizon, the air is crystal clear. There is no noise out here, no pollution, no shops, no cinema...idyllic.

Thirty families live here. About an hour's walk away is a small stream, every day women from the hamlet come down here to collect water. One hour down and one hour up for one pot of water. They haven't heard of milk and butter out here. The children run about bare foot and naked, and malnourished. There are no hospitals, no schools. And when the time comes for a baby to be born, the local midwife is called...sometimes.

When I went to the village to see the newly established child-care centre, there was this little girl of about ten wearing a faded red skirt, a trifle too long, wrapped around her thin waist, who danced like a dervish. The skirt kept slipping; she would pause, tie it up, and start dancing again.

"She is ten," said my host. "Girls here are married off when they reach puberty."

"Her education?"

He shrugged, "She knows how to read and write her name. She is literate, a big improvement over her mother who does not know even that. Maybe the next generation, or the one after that, or the one...who knows?"

Kashmir is far away from the Kollimalai hills—about two thousand kilometers away. I have been to Kollimalai but I have never been to Kashmir. I do not know anything about its green valleys and its pristine peaks. I have never seen the Dal Lake or the Nishat gardens. And I

don't know why Jahangir said that if there was a paradise on earth, then it was this, it was this, it was this. I don't know anything about it...and yet Kashmir is part of my country just as Kollimalai hills are.

My country. Truth to tell, we as a family are not very patriotic. What I mean is that no one in my family fought for Indian Independence both my grandfathers were busy eking out a living in a remote village in the south of India, more concerned about getting their daughters married and giving their sons a decent education than about freedom for their country. My paternal grandmother, when India got independence, was believed to have said that it was much nicer under the whites for then we got the railways and telephones and whatnots. She was not much enamoured of the concept of free India. And to the day she died she maintained that life was much better when the Englishman ruled India.

When India awoke at the stroke of midnight, both my grandfathers had long retired. Upstairs in the only room, under the light of a hurricane lamp, my uncles and Father kept vigil. They knew that India was getting her freedom at that very hour but there was no radio in the house so they missed the speech Nehru made. They stayed up that night crouching besides that hurricane lamp while far away in Delhi in a grand, pompous ceremony, the British flag was lowered and the tricolor was unfurled high in the skies. India was free at last and the vigil was the way my uncles and Father marked that important hour. Next day bleary-eyed and yawning they went about their usual business. Two days later, they read in the newspaper about the events in the far away Delhi. And then life went about on an even keel, at least as mush as it could. India was free but there was a life to be led and poverty was never far away.

But up in the North, quite some distance from my grandfather's village, India and Pakistan were going through violent birth pains. People were being uprooted, looted, murdered, raped...it was as though the beast in man had woken up from slumber. This happened in the north; down south, Partition was just a word. It was never to touch their lives.

Or mine. Growing up in Bangalore I had no glimpse into the psyche of the people rendered homeless by Partition. Or a clue as to what was happening in Kashmir. Other than that the country across the border was supporting militancy, that they wanted to merge with Pakistan or become independent, and that if there had been no sentimental moonshine, the issue would have never reached UN and we never would have the spectre of referendum hanging over our heads like the sword of Damocles. That about sums up the issue. And when we went nuclear, I hooted for our country.

Actually when one is viewing from inside, the panorama is warped.

We see what we want to see. Like the three monkeys, we shut our eyes, close our ears, and put a hand in front of our mouths, lest we do, say, or see the unseemly. Bombarded by the state-owned press or the highly patriotic news channels, how much do we really know? I mean do we really pay attention to the fact that our maid-servants' child has dropped out of school (you know how these people are, is what we say), or that there exists a substantial population that does not have access to health care, or that we spend a huge amount of our budget on defense... these are but examples. There is so much that I learnt when I stepped outside.

Outside, you take a fresh look. The blinkers sort of come out, for those who take them out. I mean have you ever attended those parties hosted by your friend where we all gather and start telling each other what exactly is wrong with India? On one issue we are all united: Kashmir is ours, we tell each other. None of us have been there but we all agree that it is ours. And when India tested those nuclear bombs, we all supported it with vehemence—it was our birthright that we go nuclear. Look at the irony! On the day of Buddha Purnima we went nuclear. Poor Buddha! He who stood for peace was forced to see on his birthday the spectacle of his country going nuclear...we the citizens of the country where he preached believe that nuclearization will bring peace.

I don't know. I mean I really don't know now. Not after I went to Kollimalai hills. Not after I learnt about the health care system (the non-existent one, I mean), and not after I learnt about the primary education (or rather the failure of it). It is then I started having doubts. What are we doing? Was defense really the most important aspect that it swallows a major chunk of our budget?

You don't know about my brother, do you? I never talk about him. You know right after those nuclear bombs went off, there was no peace. Instead there was another war between the two countries over Kashmir. This was the war I lost my brother in. My brother, who, being the most patriotic one in the family, had enlisted in the army soon after finishing school.

"Darling, there are so many careers for a bright person like you," my mother had been at her persuasive best.

But to no avail. To the general consternation of everyone in the extended family, that silly young goofer went into the Army. And died.

Have you ever lost a brother? The one from whom you learnt how to make a paper airplane, the one who stood by you when you went to the school the first time, the one whom you bullied mercilessly

even though he was the older one but being the sister you believed that all brothers need to be bullied so as to be kept in check, the one whom you teased relentlessly when you found about his girl friend, the one whom you hero-worshipped though wild horses would not drag it out of you, especially to him.

And the one you believe has not died but will walk through the door again with that ridiculous, sloppy grin on his face and pull your silly little pigtails? Once more?

Time they say will heal the wound but time takes her time...

Meantime, life goes on. Though your mother has lost that sparkle in her eyes and your father sometimes seems lost in thought but life goes on....

And doubts crept in. What was this whole thing about? Why are we fighting? Why did my brother have to die? And then that girl up the Kollimalai hills...I simply don't know...

* * *

I was at the Chicago Airport waiting to board my plane to Vancouver. My cousin in Vancouver was getting married and I was going to attend it. There was a four-hour wait at the O'Hare airport and I tried to while away the time by walking from one terminal to another, lugging my heavy hand baggage with me. But one can walk only so much. After a period, I flopped down on a chair and promptly fell asleep.

When I woke about half hour later, an elderly lady was occupying the chair opposite me, talking to a woman about my age. The lady was wearing a peacock-blue saree, her silver-grey hair was neatly piled up on her head, and a dab of lipstick brightened her face. The girl was wearing a pale yellow salwar-kameez. And they were talking.

"Are you from Pakistan?" the elderly lady asked.

The girl shook her head.

"No, from India."

"Where from in India?" the lady persisted.

"Bangalore," and I smiled for she was from my hometown. But before I could say anything, they swept on.

"I went there once," the lady said. "Long time back. For my honeymoon actually," a tiny smile hovered around her lips, that memory was a most cherished one.

A short silence reigned, more like a pause, as the older lady collected her thoughts.

"I was born in Delhi, you know," she started chattily. "Then of

course it was undivided. We lived in Chandni Chowk area. My father was a doctor, a man of contradictions. A very progressive man for his times who believed in educating all of us, my five sisters I mean, but at the same time very orthodox, especially where religion was concerned. So you know, I was married off when I was just fifteen. Fortunately my husband's family was also very broad in their outlook and my husband was, is, very, very ahead of his times, so between them they saw that I fulfilled my dreams of becoming a doctor. I practice in Islamabad."

"Where are you going?" suddenly she asked the girl, putting a brake on her story.

"Los Angeles."

"What fun!" the lady exclaimed girlishly. "I too am going to Los Angeles. My daughter lives there. I have two grandchildren."

"You know seeing you bring back memories of my old days. Days when I used to live in Delhi," she continued happily. "We were five sisters, and one brother. We all migrated to Pakistan when Partition occurred. I was the oldest and had been married for six months when we decided to move. My husband's family was originally from Lahore, they still had a haveli there, and it was just a matter of course that we moved back to Lahore. Oh God! How I hated it in the beginning. I used to tell my husband that if I had known all this before I would have never consented to marry him!" she grinned at the girl and continued, "My father's decision was a bit tough. Especially on my mother whose family was all scattered in and around Delhi. Her roots were in Delhi and now Father wanted to pluck it out forcibly and replant it in what she considered as foreign land. But my father was adamant. When Hindustan becomes free, we will be treated as second-class citizens, he said. I prefer that than to die in a foreign land, my mother cried passionately. Rubbish, said my father and one month after we — my husband and I — with his family, had moved. My father had our family pack up and move to where I was. It was a new beginning for him na, so he preferred to be where I was.

"You know I did not want to leave either. Probably if I had been unmarried I would have stuck on in India with my Mamu's family. He had a daughter, Nafisa. For me, leaving meant tearing myself away from her. She was my best friend. She lived close to where we lived, just a couple galis away. We both went to the same school, on the way back we would stop at Ghantewala's to buy sweets, we would fight and make up, and we would laugh and cry, we would play pranks on our unsuspecting brothers and sister," she started laughing remembering those days.

"Really I have no clue why I am telling you all this!" she exclaimed. "I am boring you, na?"

The girl protested, "No, no, you are not. You know I have never met a person who had lived through the Partition. This is just so fascinating. Please do go on."

"The south was not affected," she nodded her head. "I remember how beautiful Bangalore and Mysore were when I went there for my honeymoon. I had always wanted to see the Dusshera festival in Mysore. It was so royal and grand. Do they still have it? Yes? Oh, how lovely," she exclaimed as the girl nodded her head, "So I told my fiancé that is where I wanted to go for the honeymoon. He made all the arrangements and we went there. Nafisa went to Mussorie...she was always one for the mountains. Nafisa and I got married on the same day...thankfully the bridegrooms were different," she chuckled, her eyes mischievously twinkling.

"But you know when all these talks about Partition started, we were very upset. My Mamu said that he was not going to move. He was born here and he would die here, thank you very much. Nafisa's husband was of the same opinion. His family was going to move but Nafisa's husband said rubbish. He was with the Congress. It was a love marriage, you know. He used to come to my Mamu's house and he met Nafisa there. He proposed marriage, Nafisa said that she would marry only if Anis also got married. So a bridegroom was hurriedly searched for me. Oh dear, the things we used to do! Crazy, na?

"Anyway, Nafisa was going to stay back. And so was Mamu. He was very angry with my father. How can you betray your country, he asked my father. And my father retorted that Pakistan was his country, whereupon Mamu walked out of the house saying that he would never ever step back into it again. My mother, through this odyssey, cried her heart out."

"But Partition happened," she said with a sense of inevitability, "and when it happened I was in medical college."

"And your cousin?"

"We used to keep in touch in those early days. The border was still fluid, na. We would write long letters filled with minute details about what was happening in our lives. Nafisa and her husband even came to Lahore once to see how we all were. We of course never ever went back. The ties were all snapped.

"And then as the years passed, we became slowly immersed in our day to day lives, our families, our jobs...the letters petered out to once a month to once a year to nothing. And then there was silence."

"Sometimes I would reminisce with my husband about those days and wonder how Nafisa was."

"Then about four years back, I was at the London Airport in transit to Los Angeles. My daughter just had her second baby and I was going to help her out. And there was this lady seated across me who looked vaguely familiar. You know how it is, the shape of the eyebrow, the cut of the face, the eyes, or just the way a person talks or walks reminds you of someone else. She was wearing a pink salwar-kameez and I kept staring at her, wondering whom she reminded me off.

"And then she turned and saw me staring at her. So stupid of me, na? I apologized and told her that she just happened to remind me of someone but so foolishly I could not figure out who the person was. We started talking then, about our families, where we were going, where we were from, and I was telling that I grew up in Delhi and she told me that she lived in Delhi. And then we were exchanging our addresses, our husband's names, our father's names, and falling on each other's neck as though we were long-lost cousins."

"She was Nafisa?"

She nodded.

"Strange it was, meeting like that in another country. Nafisa had put on weight, she had been as slim as a reed, and I had been the fat one. I felt I was living in some dreamland, my dearest wish coming true. Nafisa's daughter lives in San Diego and she and my daughter are as close as Nafisa and I are. We always plan our trips you know so that we can spend maximum time together. Funny, na? Members of the same family having to meet in another country?

"You know I work in Islamabad, in a government hospital. So many poor patients, dear, and no health care for them. No education. No water. No electricity. And what do we spend our money on? On making war and defense equipment! Tell me, is the bomb required for countries that do not, can not, even provide the most basic amenities for its people? Two meals a day is not possible for some and we make bombs."

"For Kashmir..."

"And tell me what will either of us do with that piece of land? Is it going to bring us prosperity or are we going to bring happiness to those people?"

"No," murmured the girl. "Yet we fight."

"Ego problem," declared the woman. "That is all there to it. No one wants to back off."

"Schoolboys squabbling," the girl said, with laughter in her voice, making our governments something like what we were when we were kids fighting for a piece of sweetmeat.

My tongue loosened, "You know there is a village atop this hill in South India...the girl was dancing like a dervish...no school...no hospitals...no water....my brother, you know...

"Flight 335 to Los Angeles is ready for boarding. Passengers are requested to board the flight at Gate 23B".

"That is our flight, dear. Come let us go," she gathered her stuff and walked towards the gate with the girl.

My sentence was left hanging in mid-air.

* * *

The village atop the Kollimalai hills is still there. That young girl in the faded red skirt got married long time back. And there continues to be no school, no water, and no hospital

The fight goes on in Kashmir.

Sometimes I want the death of my brother revenged. But on whom will I avenge it? Those across the border, they too are like us, aren't they? So killing them...whom will I kill? My mother says it is all fated...but really is all this fated?



The Decision

Surjit Sarna

The moment of decision had come. It had to be made today, and it was Kanwal alone who had to take the decision. As far as the others were concerned, things had already been decided. She had been under intense pressure from all sides these last few days. She had felt completely isolated and did not know whom to turn to for help...and who was there to come to her aid.

Fate had dealt her the cruellest blow, and sent her world crashing around her with the twinkling of an eye. The accident had snatched Satinder from her. She had herself been severely injured and on regaining consciousness, had come to know that he had gone ahead, leaving her bereft and alone.

Why did she not die? What was there to live for now? They had been married for three years...and now there was only a lovely little girl, her precious Minnu, to remind her of Satinder. She had cried her heart out but Satinder had not come back. He had gone so far away from her that her entreaties could no longer move him.

Being the youngest in her family, she was the pet of her parents. Enveloped in a cocoon of love, she had led a carefree and happy existence.

But the searing winds had ripped away her cocoon, and the solid ground under her feet had crumbled, leaving her broken and bewildered. She seemed to be running towards a destination which was both unknown and elusive...traversing a road which was hot and dusty, with no shade or shelter.

They had all come to commiserate and console her and when leaving, had told her, "What can one say? One can't fight Him."

Kanwal's mother had cried and embracing her, had wailed, "Whose evil eye has destroyed my daughter's world? What a terrible calamity!"

Her brothers were helpless. They could do nothing for their dear sister.

Finally her parents left home. Her brothers had gone back earlier. How long could they sit around doing nothing?

When he left, her father had blessed her and told her, "What can we do, child?...If we take you with us, people will talk. But we don't want to leave you here...we are afraid of what may happen...."

He had taken leave of Kanwal's mother-in-law with folded hands and said: "Sister, we leave her to your care...."

Wiping her tears with the edge of her dupatta, she had replied, "You need have no worry about her, Vir Ji..."

Time was slipping from her grasp. It cannot stop to ponder over what is past or may happen in the future. Gradually, the whole household work had been passed on to Kanwal. She was busy the whole day, cooking meals, washing clothes, cleaning up. She had no time even to look after her little girl properly, who followed her around, whining and crying the whole day long, clinging to her legs. If Kanwal sat down with her for some time, there were calls for her from all sides. Even, Minnu was not treated properly—she who had been the darling of the family when Satinder was alive. Now she was ignored and neglected. Had she been a boy, perhaps they would have been more concerned. But, she was a girl, and could be neglected.

Kanwal's parents visited her every month...Their beloved daughter was withering before their eyes. She cried when they came, but she had very little time to sit and talk to them in private. Her mother-in-law hovered around them all the time they were there... When her father gave her five thousand rupees before leaving, she would try to refuse, but her mother-in-law would intervene, "Take it. Kanwal, it is for Minnu...It is all right." Then turning to her father, she would say, "Not that she lacks for any thing. The only thing that she doesn't have, we cannot give her. What can we do?" And lifting the edge of her dupatta to wipe her tears, she would give a deep sigh. The moment her parents stepped out, she would snatch the bundle of notes from Kanwal.

Kanwal's brother in-law and his wife, who had always been so respectful, now had no time to talk to her. She could not comprehend what had happened to all the love these people had for her earlier. Was she such a terrible burden that they found it difficult even to acknowledge her presence? She was no better than a maid for them, there, yet not there.

Then, one evening when she was crossing her mother-in-law's bedroom, she heard her own name and stopped to listen to what was being said. She was on the outer veranda and was standing in the dark. They were talking in low tones, but she heard all that was being said distinctly.

It was, Satinder's father's voice, "Tomorrow she can ask for her share in the property. Satinder's share is hers."

"She will then go to her parents after she gets her share. This is what will happen, you just wait and watch, Daddy," this was her brother-in-law. "Don't even let her get a whiff of this, but sell off Satinder's shops and house on the quiet," her mother-in-law advised.

"We will see...Minnu will also have to be married off."

"Why should we bother about that? Her parents will shoulder that responsibility," this was Minnu's grandmother, remonstrating with her husband.

"This time when her parents come, let her go with them," Kanwal's brother-in-law suggested.

"Your wife is not going to do the house work....Who will look after everything? Then, we are getting an amount of money from them every month," her mother-in-law objected.

"This is the best thing at present," her father-in-law declared. "Let her go for the time being. Don't worry about the money. There can be more problems if she stays on."

The conversation had lapsed after that and she slipped away quietly, preoccupied about what she had overheard. Their worry was that she will stake a claim to her share of the property. It is my share, she thought, why shouldn't I ask for it? She was restless and the hostility around her had made her more uneasy.

When her parents came this time, she told her mother-in-law that she wanted to go with them.

"If you want, then do go. Why should I stop you?" Was her answer, "But we will miss you both so much."

Kanwal was well aware of this, for now they will all have to fend for themselves. They will not get such a devoted maid who did all the work without a single word of complaint. But what she had overheard that evening seemed to have turned her heart to stone. How naive had she been! Why had she stayed on here after Satinder's death? Did she have no rights here, no claims on anything—property, house, money, even the money that her parents gave her every month, but which also was snatched from her? Kanwal had not responded and had come away with her parents that very day.

Now she was in a better frame of mind. She could breathe freely and think about herself and her child.

Kanwal's brothers wanted her to get married again. Her mother also wanted the same. "You can't live alone all your life...if we can find a good match, then where is the harm?" She had said...

"Mummy, I don't want to."

"That may be...I understand your feelings. It doesn't matter as long as we are alive, but what after that? Your brothers' wives...they are very good to you, but who wants to take on a life-long responsibility? Why should they?"

Kanwal did not answer. Can't I look after myself, she had thought to herself. Then her elder brother had brought a proposal. The man was a divorcee with a son from his previous marriage. They had all discussed the proposal last evening. Mandeep, her brother had made enquiries and had been satisfied.

"He has a good business, a house, a car and all that this means. But there is one thing..."

"What?"

"He wants that Minnu should live with us..."

"And his son?" Kanwal wanted to know.

"Of course he will be living with you both."

"You don't understand, child, you have a daughter. Tomorrow she will have to get married... but why should he take on that responsibility? Minnu will live with us."

"Mandeep, you did right to tell us this. What sort of justice is this? My daughter will live with my parents and his son with me! How did you think that I can live without Minnu? Do you also want to get rid of me?" She burst into tears and rushed out of the room.

Early next morning, she went to her parents room...and putting her arms around her mother, said—"Mummy I don't want to get married, I will not be a burden to you," Tears ran down her cheeks.

Her father held her tightly and said—"Don't worry Kanwal, you don't have to get married if you don't want to..."

"Papa...I don't want to get married...I don't want to get caught in another storm. I have had enough...I want to live my life my own way for my self...for Minnu..."

"Yes, child...you are right...you have already been through a lot...I will get the shop on the Rajpur Road. renovated, you can set up your boutique...are you happy now?"

"Yes..., Yes..." Kanwal said smiling through her tears, "I will make my own life.I want to do things my own way."

Translated from Punjabi by Tripti Jain

The Outcastes at the Funeral

Udai Bhanu Pandey

I could not relish in the least my cousins guffawing in this manner. But, they went on giggling and guffawing as if there would be no end to their fit. Both of them were six-footers like me and looked like Danny Dengjompa. No sooner had they arrived at my residence than they had begun to guzzle and they were dizzy and delirious by the time they arrived at the funeral grounds. Only ghouls could afford to guffaw in this manner near the dead bodies of their near and dear ones, said I to myself. Although drinking in the funeral and bathing the dead body with *Harlong* (rice beer) was a part of our tribe's tradition and many mourners had swilled wine to their heart's content, the majority being non-tribals, but none of the tribal mourners laughed except the toughs of Tiwadi; it was both confusing and offending to me. Tiwadi, the Brahmin with a pointed nose, had brought many bottles and was busy guzzling under the shade of a tree in the company of the tribal mourners just for the sake of pampering and cajoling them. He was both a *saqui* (cup-bearer) and a *rind* (dissolute). The tribal boys were just mere pawns in his hand. He was surrounded by a score of Karbi boys perfectly boozed and making fun of the large mark of sandal paste applied to his fair and broad forehead. The seniors of my tribe too had drunk in moderation, but they were perfect figures of decency and civilized behaviour. They were not highly educated but culture and good manners were in their blood and marrow. Nupu and Hukur Sing were my father's sister's sons and they had developed a soft corner for us all on a sudden after an eternal spell of hatred towards my family and me for I had joined the Indian Revenue Service.

Despite my strong protest Tiwadi had arranged a truckload of firewood for the cremation though I had bought all the provisions of the *havan* with hard cash. The last rite was a fusion of the pure tribal

tradition and the sanskritized Hindu convention. My beloved Professor Misra Sir had arranged four Brahmin priests well-versed in the Vedas and four Christian priests. There was no question of the Brahmin priests' drinking; even the Christian missionaries had not cast their glance upon the wine. They were dressed in black suits and carried the Bibles bound in a red material. They were reciting prayers for the peace of the departed soul. All the four belonged to my community, but they were men with a difference. While reciting the Bible their eyes were brimming over with tears, but the Hindu members of my tribe except my seven sisters, my three nieces and my maternal uncle Baranwal who was actually a Rajasthani businessman and my god-uncle only, had refused to shed any tears. (Like Sikhs most Karbis do not tend to weep at the funeral). In our tribe people do not wail and howl at the death and the rich hire mercenary mourners. Misra Sir observes that the soul never attains salvation unless the mourners weep bitterly. After the Bible recitation was over, the Brahmins began to chant the Vedic mantras and the entire assembly of the mourners was spellbound. Tiwadi was quite ignorant about the Vedas, but he was keen on overawing people about being a Brahmin. Handing his glass to one of his chums he burst out in English, "Don't forget that I also a Babhan." He made for the pyre but fell with a thud after staggering to his feet. The funeral ground reverberated with a loud guffaw, which seemed to rend the sky. I could mark out the fiercest laughter being that of my cousins. It was the time when the fire had nearly consumed the body and my soul was filled with mystic peace as I heard the sublime Vedic mantras being recited.

The ghoulish laugh of Nupu and Hukur Sing shattered my trance and brought me back to my childhood days. I was the only brother to my seven sisters. My *Po* (father) wanted to name me Krishno for my dark complexion, but my mother insisted, "Leave this Krishno business. If you name him Krishno he will keep on running after the girls. We will call him Ajut, the younger brother of Hemphu[2] (In the Karbi mythology Lord Vishnu is called Hemphu), who can kill the *Hiyis* (Hiyi means a demon)." Thus I became Krishno to my father and Ajut to my mother. It was only in the Matriculation examination that my official name was declared Ajut.

I was born in a village in the Nagaon district of Assam and my father possessed three hundred bighas of land. I am told that he was a total abstainer like me. But, he took to guzzling after his marriage. My father's both sisters branded my mother witch, though Baranwal uncle and other well-wishers swear that my mother is a goddess despite the fact that she deeply resented my father's generous nature. My house was

like a hotel and wine flew like water when my uncles visited our family. My aunts, fully alive to my dad's affectionate nature always took undue advantage. My uncles were educated businessmen and they knew which way the bread was buttered. Both brothers cherished sky-high ambitions and wanted to make money hand over fist. They succeeded in getting around my simple and straight father and making him their business partner. My dad sold out 250 bighas of land in order to raise the capital for a business within a day. He did not heed my mother's warning. When the business crashed after three years my uncles wriggled out. They saved their skin saying, "We are simply ruined in this business. How can we return your money? But, we can do one thing. We can migrate to the headquarters town of the new autonomous district and occupy four-five hundred bighas of land by slashing and burning the nearby forest. The town is full of Pakistani labourers who can be hired cheaply and put to farming work. Don't you worry! Now we Karbis could be richer than the Mizos and the Nagas." But unwilling to leave his ancestral village, my dad refused to move. Furthermore, my mother who had Brahmin blood in her veins and she did not like the idea of living in an entirely tribal society. The unexpected reversal of fortune caused the beginning of the cold war in the family. My dad took to drinking and the family was haunted by a shadow of dejection.

So far the family did not have to waste lacs of rupees on the *chumangkan* (A very expensive shradha ceremony of the Karbis without which the departed soul cannot attain peace or solvation, according to the popular belief), for it was the first death in the family. But the expensive marriages of my sisters had caused the family an irreparable financial damage bringing it to the brink of ruin. The parental bickering left us the siblings shocked. Any discussion about our uncles made our dad lose his temper. My mother would be lost in domestic chores and myself in my books.

The month of December had just set in and I was thoroughly engrossed in my studies in the seventh standard. The evening was marred by a bitter tiff between my parents. After inflicting upon my mother a heavy blow of verbal injury dad ordered me to fetch *Harlong*. (The Karbi husbands have a reputation of being very polite and loving and they refrain from hurting their wives or any woman).

"Po, I have to write my mathematics examination tomorrow. I must study, mustn't I?" I had tried to refuse very politely, but he flew into a terrible rage.

"Your mother keeps on henpecking me because your grandpa's lands had to be sold out. But you are my true begotten son, aren't you?

Why do you show me your temper then? Damn you, I am going to sacrifice all your bloody books to god *Agni*, you sala of mine!" And thus, he threw all my books into the fire that was keeping us warm in that chilly weather. When he left for the wine shop I told my mother that I was going to my neighbour as all my books and notes were reduced to ashes.

I left my home the next day at dawn. I took a job as a domestic servant at a grocery shop in a large village in the district. The Bihari businessman, my employer, took interest in my studies and cared to feed me well despite being a hard taskmaster. I used to visit my home from time to time to see my mother and my sisters, but made a point to return to my employer's before the sunset. After sitting for the matriculation examination I began to work in the city for earning enough money for my college education. I passed three months there tending the gardens and teaching yoga to the children of the officers and the professors. On my return to the village Tarachand Uncle hugged me warmly. The *Dainik Asom* had published my photograph on the front page; I had passed my exam securing the highest marks. It was Tarachand Uncle who slipped a sum of Rs.2000/ into my pocket for my education at Diphu, the District headquarters town of Karbi Anglong. After my college education I left for Guwahati and then for Allahabad. I ended as an officer of the central services posted at Bhopal. On my return to my village I noticed some change in my father's attitude towards me, though his bickering with my mother went on and on.

My favourite professor of Economics, Misra Sir advised me to get a house constructed at Diphu after my posting at Bhopal. When I came back to Assam for my holidays I came to learn that my uncles (my father's brothers-in-law) had cheated my family and they had a plantation of rubber gardens stretching into thousands of bighas. They had a thriving business of sawmills and constructed a palatial building in the town. Those were the times when both autonomous districts of Assam used to be havens for traders. I kept my two sisters at my Diphu residence under the supervision of my mother and took the remaining two to Bhopal for their higher education.

I was beset with the problem of entertaining an army of uninvited guests who would throng our house at Diphu, stay there for weeks and waste my sisters's and our mother's time. In order to keep such guests at bay I kept two German Shepherds and asked my mother to keep my sisters under strict discipline. My mother was happy and contented and willing to be with me at Bhopal, but my dad refused to leave Assam and his ancestral village at any cost. I had succeeded in fighting the family

poverty. My two sisters were now married after high education and they were in the Assam Civil Service. The other two were in M.A. hoping to be settled. The first three were already married.

There was a considerable improvement in my dad. On my arrival at Assam I kept with my mother wines of good quality and asked her to ration it out in order to keep my dad away from excessive drinking. But he had failed to stop drinking altogether. After my success the poverty was averted and his two middle daughters were married respectably. But he was consumed by the heavy weight of a sense of guilt for having sold out his ancestral property. He would very often leave our beautiful house at Diphu for his village home. After swilling whisky in the evening he would recite in his male soprano voice *Sabin Alun (the Karbi Ramayana)* and go to bed after dinner. After staying at Bhopal for a week he would excuse himself saying, "Krishno, allow me to leave Baba, your mother would be lonely. Despite occasional tiffs I cannot bear the pangs of separation...my old girl must be miserable without me."

He was unable to stay at Diphu too for long. Very keen to cherish his father's memory, he would make a dash to his village. He was fond of cultivating sugarcane and ploughing the land, he was also fond of his two sisters.

After having lit the fire I was badly haunted by my dad's memories. I had fought hard with my tears eager to bubble out, but I was completely overwhelmed by emotions after listening to the Vedic mantras. Misra Sir had shadowed me after my father's death. When he gave an English rendering of one hymn I burst into tears.

Only seven or eight hundred mourners were lingering now at the cremation ground though a great many people had turned up to pay their last respects to my dad. My family enjoyed the love and respect of the entire locality both among the tribals and the plainspeople. But we were all fed up with our two uncles and our cousins. That was the reason why we did not give our elder sisters to our cousins in marriage. (The Hindu tribals of the Northeast have a custom of marrying the maternal uncle's daughter like the South Indian Hindus). Before the marriage of the remaining sisters of mine they had bagged two Naga brides from Dimapur who had brought a fortune to their house. Both Naga girls were embodiments of culture and they had gracefully adapted themselves to the Hindu customs. But my mother, my sisters, my wife and myself were fed up with Nupu and Hukur Sing and their caddish ways. In our Karbi society a Mama is the most revered person and after becoming a father-in-law he becomes more revered than even God. But, my cousins proved to be an exception to this rule.

My cousins did not allow themselves to be affected in any way after their Mama's death. There was absolutely no sign of grief or loss written on their faces. After having emptied all the bottles they picked up a bitter quarrel with Tarachand Uncle. He was a sober and wise person most unwilling to create any scene at the cremation ground. But, he was virtually waylaid by Hukur Sing.

'Baranwal, how do you have the audacity to say that drinking is undesirable at a funeral? Why do you refuse to see how we have drenched our Mama in wine? We offer so many things like shoes, umbrellas, wine and clothes to the dead so that they may get all these things in heaven too after this life. But have you ever realized that all these things are futile without laughter? Hence our laughter and this will contribute to his happiness.' They were using "thou" for our uncle and their tone was very rude.

Tarachand Uncle was put out of his countenance at this behaviour. He had a terrific moral influence in the village. Besides being a successful businessman, he was also a good social worker eager to share the grief and happiness of the village. He was my father's bosom friend and hated the idea that his nephews should guffaw like ghouls at the funeral.

Till the eighties of the last century the tribal young men used to be all respect to the elderly. The senior citizens did not hesitate to thrash even young boys who were complete strangers if the latter were caught on the wrong foot. But the old and the elderly were pushed to the wall after the politicians had begun to drag adolescent boys and girls into active politics. The elderly Karbis of our locality were sulking at the demeanour of my cousins. But they were keen to keep their mouth shut. Nupu was a greater cad than Hukur Sing. He accosted Tara uncle and clutching his hand he ejaculated, "Taraji, these four Karbi Christian priests are making themselves perfect clowns by refraining from drinking. Do you mean to say that the Christians do not drink at the funeral? Have you read O' Connor's story *The Drunkard?* Father and son are attending a funeral. The minor son furtively empties the glass of wine meant for the father. These blasted Christians in their black suits and red Bibles are playing archangels. But we cannot be cheated so easily. What do you say in Hindi—*Sau Sau chuhe khake bili Haj ko chali*—the cat is on the way to the pilgrimage after devouring hundreds of rats?"

After this both brothers burst into a ghoulish laughter so much so that nearly thirty-forty mourners who were busy guzzling were swept off their feet and began to giggle. Their guffaw appeared to be like the laugh of the ghouls who are supposed to drink the blood of the dead. Misra Sir rose to the occasion and consoled me, "Just ignore these

fellows, Ajut. Ghouls laugh only when the decadence sets in before the culture begins." After that guffaw there prevailed silence all around the cremation ground. The elders had an experience of *shmashan-vairagya* (asceticism at the cremation ground) and the young shocked with a sense of shame fell silent. When we were about to leave we could not spot the dazzling, brand new Icon car of my cousins. I apologised to Tara Uncle and we returned home.

My two sisters were holding my mother in their arms. Despite tiffs my parents loved each other. She was unable to stand the shock of his demise. Defying the traditions of an orthodox Brahmin family she had married my father. But, all was lost for her now.

I was suddenly startled by the loud sound of the television. Some one was singing jazz. Nupu was repeating the song and Hukur Sing was dancing to his tune.

"Do you watch the turmoil and the din your brothers are raising? Nobody will testify that they have returned after the cremation of their maternal uncle." Tara uncle's wife was mortally offended by the behaviour of my cousins.

It was Nupu who flew into a mad rage at this observation.

"Arrey, it is this old hag who had kept my Mama provoked against us. We are tribals. We hate acting and crying just for the sake of crying. That Tiwadi fellow who has spent as many as twenty bottles of whisky on our guests is far better than you people . He brought an entire truckful of firewood for burning the dead body besides." Now it was impossible on my part to keep my mouth shut. "Nupu Da, watch your language and watch your behaviour." I put in an ice-cold voice.

I could still hear the devilish laughter of Hukur Sing. As he emerged from inside I showed both the brothers the gate of my house.

"O.K., O.K., sahib bahadur, we are leaving." Both brothers responded spontaneously. Then they burst out laughing with all their might. They opened the gate and hurried towards the car. After a pause they turned towards me and guffawed after gesticulating wildly at me. They did appear slightly shamefaced, but they were unable to control their laughter. As I have narrated already my both cousins were as handsome as Danny Dengjompa, but their sky-rending laughter had made their faces look utterly ugly. My sisters took me inside the house, but their ghoulish laughter reverberated there too. It kept on assailing my ears till I heard the horn of the Icon car.

Translated from Hindi by Ravi Kumar Singh

Tiruvaalangadu Padigam: Ten Verses on Tiruvaalangadu by Karaikkal Ammaiyar

H.S. Shiva Prakash

Tiruvaalangadu is the site of one of the most celebrated Shiva temples of Tamilnadu. According to the legend, this is the place where Shiva performed a particular kind of Tandava called 'Urdhava Tandava'. It is said that Shiva and his consort Kali once entered into a dance contest. Though the contest lasted for long, neither of them lost or won. Shiva then decided to perform a Tandava dance with his leg raised straight up perpendicularly and challenged Kali to perform the same feat. Kali was unwilling to do so out of womanly modesty. This is how Shiva won the contest. The temple of Tiruvaalangadu bears testimony to this famous legend. Karaikkal Ammaiyar is said to have composed two decads in praise of the Lord dwelling in Tiruvaalangadu.

Barring Avvaiyar, Karaikkal Ammaiyar is the oldest known Tamil woman poet. Her period is believed to have been 5 Century A.D. Karaikkal is a sea-shore town close to Nagapattinam, where once upon a time lived a rich merchant called Paramchittan with his chaste and beautiful wife Punitavathi. Their married life was heaven on earth. An unexpected event changed it all. One day some strangers gave Paramchittan two mangoes of the rarest quality at his place of work, which he promptly sent home to his wife. Soon afterwards a Shaivite mendicant appeared at her door for alms. Punitavathi had not yet completed her cooking, but the mendicant was extremely hungry. She served him one of the mangoes sent by her husband, thinking that it was her share. When the husband returned home and sat down for a meal, she served him the remaining mango. Its taste was beyond compare. The husband asked for the other mango also. At a loss, Punitavathi prayed to Lord Shiva to send another mango of the same quality. The prayer was fulfilled!

Another mango descended. Punitavathi served it to her husband. The husband found that the second mango was incomparably superior to the first one. He felt it could not be the same mango that he had sent. On being asked where it came from, Punitavathi told him the whole story. From that moment on Paramchittan began to look up to his wife. His heart was filled with reverence and awe. Unable to carry on with normal marital life with her, he went to another town and took another wife. With this Punitavathi's married life came to an end. Punitavathi then became a devotee of Shiva going from temple to temple and singing the Lord's glory. She was often troubled and waylaid by men who were bewitched by her beauty. To ward this off, she prayed to the Lord to make her ugly like a ghoul. The Lord again granted her prayer. He conferred on her the most terrible form which would keep men away. She later came to be known as Pey Nayanmar – a ghoul-like saint. She came to be known as Karaikkal Ammaiyar–the Holy Mother of Karaikkal — whose life, more or less as summed up above, was later recounted by the Tamil bhakti poet Sekkizhaar in *Periya Puranam* and by the Kannada poet Harihara in *Karaikkal Ammayarara Ragale* in eleventh and thirteenth centuries respectively.

Undoubtedly one of the three great Shaivite women poets of India, she is known to be a pioneer of several styles of composition that were to become popular with both Shaivite and Vaishanavite Tamil poets. It is as if she bridges ancient Tamil culture with the later bhakti culture. The forms like *patikam* (decad), *antati* (sequence of devotional poems), and *manimalai* (garland of poems) are said to have been popularized by her. Though she is not considered as one of 'First Three' of Shaivite poets she was a precursor of the great efflorescence of Shaivite poetry (circa. 6 to 8 century A.D.).

Her vision of Shiva is different from that of the other two Shaivite women poets, Akka (12th century) and Lalleshwari (14^{th} Century). Akka's vachanas of devotional love are built around the image of Shiva as the Handsome one. The modifier 'Chenna' prefixed to her 'Ankita' (Chennamallikarjuna) means just this. Lalleshwari's vision of Shiva is more philosophical and formless. By contrast, Karaikkal Ammaiyar presents a vision of Shiva as 'The Terrible One,' particularly in the two decads translated here. Both the poems are littered with hideous images associated with cremation grounds. But a terrible beauty of a different kind is suggested by these very images. Also, a sense of freedom and joy hidden in frightening sounds and sights of the cremation grounds is expressed in the dance of Shiva as dramatized by the poem.

These poems contain some very interesting details concerning the

cultural life of the Tamil land of the ancient period. It speaks of dances and movements named in the poem but are no more extant. Equally interesting is the mention of 'kol' as the first note, pointing to the existence of a different kind of music.

Both the decads conclude with 'Phalashruti', a statement of the benefits of reciting the poem. One of them assures Shiva's grace to whoever sings and dances these verses, hinting at the possibility that these poems were meant for a song and dance performance.

A word about the translation. An attempt is made to keep to the rhythm of the source text in which one hears the intoxicating drum beats of Shiva's 'damaru' and the kinetic aspect of the imagery is also retained. Whichever words do not have an English counterpart are transliterated. The text is taken from the Tamil original in the *Hymns of Karaikkal Ammaiyar* (tr. – T.N. Ramachandran) published by IISSR Dharmapuram, Mayiladuthurai, Tamilnadu, in 1993.





Karaikkal Ammaiyar

Verses On Tiruvaalangadu

Part One

1
Sagging breasts; swollen veins;
A skeleton with a pair of sunken eyes;
Blood-red gums; teeth jutting out:
A long-ankled she-demon dwells
In a wilderness—where,
His matted hair scattered in all directions
His fiery but cooling body is dancing—
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

2
A ghoul puts her feet into the cacti,
Picks up a burning pyre, grinds it
Into eyeshade and wobbles on.
At the sight of a fearsome beast,
Frightened, she jumps back into the pyre,
But, singed and enraged, she puts it out
By pouring ashes. Here too He dances
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

3
Vaikai beads' jingling garlands;
In the terrible gloom of the dead of the night,
The owl's hoot! Andalai's song!
Horned owls leap back to branches
In cacti's shade entwined with *indai*

Look! A burning row of pyres!
How cool but fiery His dancing body!
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

4
Seeing foxes grabbing rice grains
From fire-pits and eating,
Clapping their hands, ghouls scream:
"Foxes have got it. Why not we?"
A hullabaloo, running amuck
In such ghastly places, He dances on,
His left foot up, touching the sky
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

5
After devouring thick marrow,
A garland of white skulls round her neck,
A ghoul named her baby Kali,
Brought her up with great affection,
Dusted her off, gave her the suck
But vanished one day never to return
Amidst the baby ghoul's cries, He dances on
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

6
Cleft-footed, long-nailed ghouls
Feed their young on owls and partridges
The egg-laying winged owls,
Foxes and hordes of ghouls
Turn over and tug at orphaned corpses
He dances on in eight directions
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

7
Rolling-eyed and flame-mouthed,
Dancing *tungakam*, running about,

Ghouls lift up roasting corpses
And gobble them up. In such a place,
The jingling anklet bells!
He dances *nattinai* to their tunes,
His matted locks helter skelter
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

8
This man who went from country to city
Hunting for joy is now dead
How he sleeps next to an aged man
Covered in a shroud. Still, setting
Woods and hills, lands and seas
Spinning, our Lord dances.
Holing a torch in His raised hand
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

9
Singing songs of seven notes
In tune with *uli*, *yili* , *kakkilai*,
Charchari, *kokkilai* and hand drum
Tuganita, trumpet, cymbal, *veena*,
Madalige, garadigai, vainkai, madol
Playing on *damaru*, *kadamila* and *mandai*,
Orchestrating them all, He dances
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

10
Fools, completely out of their minds,
Carry their dead to where
Two roads meet, to perform rites
And ignite the pyre. At twilight,
The light of flames and music of gods!
The reverberating *damaru* beats!
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

Part Two

1
Where *elava, ekkai, karai*
And *surai* grow in abundance,
Where, grabbing the guts of dead ones,
Gobbling them up, surrounded
By countless corpses, ghouls,
Their eyes throbbing like drums,
Go on singing their songs,
Look! The Handsome One is dancing.

2
Where marrow melts and wet the earth,
Where ghouls with long teeth
And sunken eyes dance *tunankai*,
Extinguish blazing pyres
And gormandize corpses
To their souls content, amidst such
Joyous sports, a torch blazing in His hand,
Look! The Handsome One is dancing

3
Where jackals tug at stinking
White skulls punctured by birds
Where owls hoot, owlets spread
Their wings and barn owls look
Frightening, foxes flit about
Howling, He chooses to dance
In such a charnel house, the Lord,
Whose name is Cremation Ground.

4
Is this corpse really dead?
Testing it with his finger, the ghoul
Gives a yell and, throwing a firebrand
At it, starts to flee in terror
So do other ghouls, beating
Their bellies with bewilderment
They too take to their frightened heels

In such a fearsome wilderness
The Supreme One goes on dancing

5
Withered *mulli*; charred wood;
Brains bursting out of skulls;
In forests filled with withered cacti
And full of wood apple trees,
With spotted antelope skin on,
And tiger's hide dangling
Down His shoulder, in such a wilderness
The Supreme One goes on dancing.

6
Where owlets of many colours
With shining and crooked beaks
Feed on skulls and brains of corpses
And go round howling,
Their hair out like toddy fronds,
The burning charcoal-eyed ghouls
Are making music with flutes
The Handsome One is dancing.

7
Scratching up charred corpses
But unable to find any flesh,
Owlets are fast asleep
Bad times for ghouls!
Ah, *muluvam* music of gods
Keeping step with its notes
Alongside the retinue of ghouls
The Handsome One is dancing.

8
Where lofty bamboos scatter pearls
Where burning dead bodies crackle
Giving out sparks, disheveled
And screaming ghouls eat

Dead fetuses to their heart's content,
As the daughter of mountains
Is watching on,
The Great Magician is dancing

9
Where monkeys frolic about
Amidst bamboo groves,
Ghouls, eagles, white skulls
And smoke of pyres abound
As the crooked moon sways
White *tuti* and *parai* resound
Listen! *Kol*, the first note
The Supreme One is dancing

10
Sunken-bellied dwarfish ghouls,
And grown up ones with mouths of flame
Are rife in wilds drowned by *indai*
Ghouls with teeth jutting out
Are thrilled and angered by turns
Eyeing their young. Listen!
Kol, the first note. With matted hair scattered,
The Pure One is dancing.

11
Wearing the moon in the matted locks
He is dancing His spiral dance
The snake at the waist too is dancing
Whoever dances, through His Grace,
These ten verses sung by me,
Ghoul from Karai with mouth
Of fire and crooked teeth,
Will be rid of all sins.

Translated from Tamil by H.S. Shiva Prakash

Note: "He" is Lord Shiva.

Sudhanshu Chaturvedi in Conversation with Brajendra Tripathi: Excerpts....

Brajendra Tripathi: Let me take you down memory lane to the days when you started to put your thoughts in black and white. Tell me something about those initial days.
Sudhanshu Chaturvedi: I took to writing when I was just eight years old. My first poem was titled "Hay Pareeksha." I remember the first four lines even now.

Tera ana sunkar devi
Ham kamp-kamp rah jate hain
Ye lal tamatar se chehare
Bhaya se peele pad jate hain.

This poem was widely appreciated by my friends. Later it was published in a famous Hindi weekly *Acharya*, which was edited by Raghavacharya. This was followed by many more pieces in the same weekly.

In those days I was studying in a primary school in my village Madhav Nagar. I used to take recourse to the loneliness of night, in the light of kerosene lamp, to put my thoughts down so that others won't come to know about it. They were against my literary pursuits. I also wrote a short story based on my mother's struggles in life, "Meri Maa." My literary forays found further expression in the college magazine to which I used to contribute many pieces in different names. There were not many students who were interested in writing in those days. Vidya Charan Shukla was the editor of that magazine.

BT : Along with your original writing, you entered the field of translation. Would you elucidate that?

SC : I first ventured into the field of translation when I was a B.A. student. Apart from my literary interest, another reason was to earn some money to support my studies. Original works did not bring me much financial benefits. On the other hand, translations were financially more beneficial. In those days I was not getting any money from home to continue my studies. My first translation was a book on Russian Constitution written by Dr. P. R. Sahni which I translated into Hindi, a job I did in 15 days. He gave me a cycle, a watch and some money in recognition of my work. Then I went on to translate many more books.

I got admission to the Department of Modern Indian Languages in the Delhi University where I learnt Malayalam. In 1964, my translation of a Malayalam book *Odayil Ninnu* was published in Hindi titled *Naali Se*. It was a text book for me. Dr. K. Bhaskaran Nair, then Principal of Brennan College, Thalassery, in Kerala wrote the introduction for it. Another translation was the famous historical drama *Veluthampi Dalava* written by Kainikkara Padmanabha Pillai. The introduction for this book was written by Dr. Ratnamai Devi Dixit, wife of famous journalist Sita Charan Dixit. She is the mother of J.N. Dixit. Another translation was the famous Malayalam book *Sandhya* written by G. Sankara Kurup, the first Jnanpith Award winner. The introduction of my translation was written by Dr. Harivansh Rai Bachchan.

BT : You were a lone star in the literary horizon of Kerala in the sense that Malayalam was not your mother tongue. How did the litterateurs of that state react to it?

SC : I was in touch with several literary figures of Kerala even before I reached there. *Kerala Bharati*, a Hindi monthly published by Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha, Ernakulam, was publishing my poems, short stories and articles. I became a regular invitee to several seminars and meetings conducted by the Hindi Prachar Sabha. During those days I came in contact with many Malayalam writers who received me well and encouraged me to write original works in Malayalam along with the translation. A number of weeklies in Malayalam like *Mathrubhoomi, Malayala Manorama, Malaya Rajyam, Janayugam, Kunkumam, Kesari, Kerala Bhushanam* and so on published my original writings as well as my translations.

BT : Tell me more about your experiences in the field of translation.

SC : My most famous translation is *Himgiri Vihar* of Swami Tapovanamji

Maharaj, guru of Swami Chinmayanand. The disciple of Swamiji, Swami Mahadev Vanam, came to the hostel of Sree Kerala Varma College, where I was the hostel warden, with the original book. He wanted me to translate the work into Malayalam. I was only 22 years old. He had come to me with the impression that I might be an old man mature enough to translate such a highly philosophical book. When he saw me, he had second thoughts. Only after engaging me in a discussion on Vedanta for over three hours, did he decide to entrust me with the work. I translated that work in six months and it was published from Delhi, which was well received. It got an award for it too.

BT : How did you come into contact with the literary personalities in Kerala and how did such meetings shape your literary journey?

SC : One of my first meetings after reaching Kerala was with the literary giant P. Keshava Dev whose *Odayil Ninnu* I had translated. I wanted to present him my work. In those days, writers used to hold meetings in Thiruvananthapuram to which I was a regular invitee. I met Shooranad Kunjan Pillai, Kainikkara Padmanabha Pillai, Kainikkara Kumara Pillai, G. Vivekanandan, P.K. Parameshwaran Nair, O.N.V. Kurup, Prof. N. Krishna Pillai, T.N. Gopinathan Nair and several other literary personalities. It was because of the loving prodding of these great men that I translated their works. During my stay in Ernakulam, I came across people like Mahakavi G. Shankara Kurup, A.D. Hari Sharma, M. K. Sanu, Parappurath, Justice V.R.Krishna Iyer, Ponkunnam Varkey, Vaikom Chandrasekharan Nair, Kambissery Karunakaran, C.N. Sreekanthan Nair and so on. In the cultural capital of Kerala – Thrissur — I befriended people like Prof. Joseph Mundassery, Puthezhathu Raman Menon, P. Narendra Nath, C. L. Jose, O.M.C. Namboothirippad and Olappamanna. In Calicut, I met K.P. Kesava Menon, Kuttikrishna Marar, N. V. Krishna Warrier, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, P.C. Kuttikrishnan 'Uroob', Akkittam Achyutan Namboothiri, Thikkodiyan, K.T. Muhammed, M.T. Vasudevan Nair, A.P.P. Namboothiri and many others. My contact with them led to the translation of many of their works, sometimes without going into the merit of the books. However, some of the works, which I translated, had received Sahitya Akademi awards. These writers wanted me to enlighten them on the history of Hindi literature and this led to my writing of *Hindi Sahitya Charitram* in Malayalam.

BT : You are both an original writer and a translator. Does the style of other writers come in the way of your translation?

SC : My experience shows that quite often a translator would have to compromise his own style to do justice to his work. I started writing poems, then became a playwright, essayist and a critic. So whichever style that suited the translation of a particular work, it was put to use. There were occasions when I felt that I was wasting time on translation. On many occasions, I had vowed not to undertake further translation works. But, I had to renege on my vows to keep up personal relationships. I feel that original writers should not go for translations of others' works, because it brings much mental agony to them. On the contrary, I also feel that original writers should go for translation for it will enrich the literature. It is this latter mental disposition that made me undertake many works of translation.

BT : The cultures of Uttar Pradesh and Kerala are poles apart. How did you integrate this divergence in your translations?

SC : It is true that there is a vast difference in the culture and traditions of the two States. Such differences had to be clarified in foot-notes in the translations. In the case of many usage in Kerala, I had to look for similar ones in Rajasthani, Brij or Kanauji 'slangs'. In some cases I had to look into Sanskrit usages. Such difficulties arose not only in the case of words but also in idioms and phrases. I had to get to the 'soul' of both the languages.

BT : Which aspects do you specially keep in mind at the time of translation?

SC : I read the book under translation at least three times. While reading it I try to visualize the atmosphere and situation embodied in the work. I fully assimilate it. Then it undergoes a churning in the mind. It is also important to select the language and style. It is said that 'Poetry comes from the heart and goes to the heart'. I fully apply this saying to all fields of literature. It is my effort to see that there is absolutely no difference between the translation and the original work. But it has never been possible to bring out a translation which is absolutely similar to the original work. Usually I leave the translation work for six months after its completion. Then I go through my work again and give the final touches. This helps me to remove the inaccuracies in the translation. There had been occasions I had to go for a total rewriting. Such Herculean efforts are needed to bring out a translation which does utmost justice to the original work, though many translators do not take such pain and still such works get published.

BT : Which was your most challenging work of translation?

SC : The most challenging translation work was that of *Kayar*. For, its

language was one used in Kuttanad, mostly in Alappuzha District, Kerala some 150 years back. Many of its words are no more in use in Malayalam. The meanings of many words have also undergone a sea change. My effort was all the more challenging because four authors had earlier tried their hands at it, but were not appreciated. They were all eminent translators. It was then that I came into the picture. I took almost 10 months to complete the work of about 1200 pages.

In poetry, the translation of Kumaran Asan's *Chintavishtayaya Sita* was the most challenging one. For, the then Governor had announced an award for its translation and 44 people had undertaken the job. However, none of them was found eligible for the award. First I transliterated it into Hindi and read it once again. After a lot of contemplation, I did its translation into prose and then into verse. It was my intention that I should translate it into the same 'Viyogini' metre which was used in the original poem. I was in Lucknow at that time. I once saw in my dream that I had translated it into Hindi in 'Viyogini' metre itself and I was reading it out before my friends who were praising it highly. It was 2.30 a.m. I got up immediately, had my bath and meditated for sometime. Then I started the translation work and in three days I completed it. I handed over the translation to Dr. Prem Narayan Tandon, editor of *Rasvanti*, saying: "If you find it good you may serialize it in your magazine. He liked it and published it in *Rasvanti*. Later it was published under the title *Tyakta Ke Ansu* by Hindi Sahitya Bhanadar with the introduction of the renowned poet Dr. Puttulal Shukla 'Chandrakar'.

BT : You have translated both prose and poetry. What is the difference in both the experiences?

SC : One cannot do full justice to translation of poetry. For it is not easy for the translator to enter into the poet's mind and soul and reproduce it in the same spirit. Sometimes the translation could be better than the original work. But there is the danger that translation could deviate from the core of the original. In Malayalam, there are 32 translations of Kalidasa's *Abhinjana Shakuntalam*. But none is fully successful. Vallathol's translation in certain aspects is better than the original, but it has deviated from the original. The translation by A. R. Raja Raja Varma is also pretty good. What I did was to translate Kalidasa's work in prose, giving the original text alongside the translation. But I am fully satisfied with my translation of Kumaran Asan's *Chinthavishtayaya Sita*. For, I am a poet too and I could get

to the core of the original poetry.

BT : What makes a good translator? Is it enough to have knowledge of two languages or does it require more training?

SC : One should have meticulous knowledge of the language in which one is translating a work. One should also have deep knowledge of the language of the original work. Translation is devotion. If one goes by monetary considerations alone, one will end up a total failure. Such translations will not take one anywhere. A translator should be involved in his work both mentally and physically. That makes one a successful translator.

As far as training is concerned, it is a matter of formality. I would say that one needs more practice than training. If training is given to a translator by people who have only theoretical knowledge, it is of little help to anyone. But, if the training is imparted by those who have practical knowledge, it can go a long way in boosting the translators' ability.

BT : How satisfied are you with your role as a translator?

SC : I always feel that I should do better than I have done so far. This is true not only as a translator but also as an original writer. I have been showered with praises for my work in translation. There had been special adulation for my works of translation into Malayalam from Hindi, Sanskrit and English. I am overwhelmed when I am called the '*Manasputra* of Malayalam'. Moreover, some of my works had been overwhelmingly received by the readers. The 1200-page *Kalidasasarvaswom* has gone into third edition. The Malayalam translation of *Amrit Aur Vish* too has seen three editions. These are the fruits of my dedication and devotion to work for over 38 years. Like Beeshma Pithamah, I was on the bed of arrows for all these years. The sole aim of this hard and consistent work has been to remove the stain of allegation against the people of North India that they are not interested in learning South Indian languages. I have proved them wrong. I have got an award for my work in Malayalam. It is for the first time that a North Indian has bagged an award for his original work in Malayalam.

BT : What was the status of Hindi awareness campaigns in those days in Kerala?

SC : Before I reached Kerala, people like Pandit Harihar Sharma, Pandit Devdhoot Vidhyarthi, Devdas Gandhi and so on had done commendable work in this field. When I reached there in 1964, some people could understand and speak Hindi. I travelled the length and breadth of Kerala and gave speeches in Hindi and I did not

face any difficulty. People loved Hindi and they were filled with national pride. If one reads the writings of Vallathol and Kumaran Asan, they are oozing with nationalisst sentiment. But in course of time, Keralites got the wrong impression that Hindi was being imposed on them. It became a political issue and anti-Hindi sentiments began to run high. As the anti-Hindi movement picked up momentum, some people advised me to leave the State. There were reports that some people had been burnt alive in Madras where anti-Hindi movement was at its peak. I used to tell those who advised me to leave Kerala, "I have come here to serve Malayalam, and not to propagate Hindi. I am willing to die for the cause." People slowly respected my intention. I made it a point to speak Malayalam at all times. I also think that if there hadn't been any initiative at the government-level to propagate Hindi, it would have developed much faster. The people saw red in the government-level initiative to propagate Hindi. Even now there is some resistance to Hindi in the State. I too had to face the wrath of some people in Kerala. But, since I was engaged in work related to Malayalam, my critics could not do much harm to me.

BT : During the Freedom Movement, all the non-Hindi speaking leaders had supported the cause of Hindi. Among the top non-Hindi speaking leaders were Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen, Dayanand Saraswati, Subhash Chandra Bose, Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel and Vinoba Bhave. But post-Independence, most non-Hindi speaking people turned anti-Hindi proponents. How did this turn around happen?

SC : It is true that during the freedom struggle all people supported Hindi with 'one mind and soul'. I feel that the 15-year transition period given for English was wrong. During this period we did not try to implement Hindi in its totality. There was no need for the government to take any lead in this matter. It should have been a people's initiative. On the other hand, the government's involvement gave a political colour to the whole issue. Pandit Nehru's role in the whole episode was less than praiseworthy; rather it complicated the issue. His statement that Hindi would not be imposed on non-Hindi speaking people till such time they themselves are ready for it was the last nail struck on the issue. We were to bid farewell to the use of English in 1965. But, it did not happen. If the Centre wanted, it could do so by bringing in legislation in this regard.

The Keralites have no problem with Hindi literature, Hindi songs

or Hindi movies. But, they say they don't want to use it as a working language. For, they think that Hindi is being imposed on them, which they want to resist at any cost. But they should realise that they will have to accept it as a working language one day or the other.

BT : How do you rate the role of translation in the contemporary situation?

SC : Translation has a major role to play in the contemporary life. There are innumerable languages in the world. If one wants to relate oneself with them, translation is the only bridge with them. The same is the case with the Indian languages.

There are a lot of similarities among the Indian languages – whether they are Aryan or Dravidian languages. It is only through translation that we understand this. Hindi translation is the best medium to link these languages.

BT : Now let us discuss your original writings. You said that at the age of eight years you had written your first poem 'Hai Pareeksha'. But which is your first published work?

SC : I wrote an essay titled 'Kalpana' at the age of 12. This was my first published piece. The next work was 'Sumananjali' which I wrote when I was 17 years old and a B.A. student. The next year I published three books on Kalidasa – *Kalidas, Kalidas Aur Unka Meghadoot* and *Meghadoot*. In *Meghadoot*, along with the original text, I had given the Hindi and English translations. It had footnotes too. Many editions of this book have been published. Later, one edition was published with Hindi translation alone. At the age of 20 I had published *Shakuntala Natak: Ek Anuseelan*.

Regal Book Depot in Delhi was known for publishing notes for students. My teacher Bharat Bhushan Saroj was well-known for writing notes. But, I stood firm that I would not change my book *Shakuntala Natak: Ek Anuseelan* into notes – question-answer form. So the book was not published for six months. But, later it was published with the introduction by noted critic and Reader in Delhi University Dr. Udaya Bhanu Singh.

Immediately after this, the book edited by me, *Shakuntala Natak* of Raja Laxman Singh, was published by the same publisher. It had my introduction, comparative studies and notes. Many editions of this book have come out. At the same time, my *Sankshiptam Balakandam* was published by Motilal Banarasi Das which was a prescribed text for B. A. and B.A. (Hons) and many editions were published. During the same period, a collection of my essays titled *Nibandh Bharati* was also published.

In 1966 three books were published – *Jaggo Phir Ek Bar* (collection of my radio talks and poems), *Dukh Ki Dhup: Sukh Ki Varsha* (children's novel) and *Kalpana* (second edition).

BT : You wrote *Kalpana* when you were still a child. At that age one does not have matured experiences. What was the background of *Kalpana*?

SC : This book is based on a true incident in life and its heroine Kalpana is not an imaginary figure. She was a living figure who created waves in my life. I also wove national feelings into the theme. In those days I was writing patriotic poems. Some excerpts of such poems are also included in this novel. Actually I am the hero of the story. But in her I gave life to my inner feelings and wove the outlines of the plot around it.

BT : How far were you acceptable in the horizon of Hindi literature? Are you satisfied with that?

SC : I had left the Hindi belt at the age of 21. The works I have published till then were not very well-known. The publishers too were not so well-known. Only those books are discussed in which the writer himself is involved. Since I was not much involved and having no group of my own, my books were not highlighted in those days.

After reaching Kerala I wrote a novel *Apnom Ke Beech* which was serialised in *Rasvanti*. I wrote in its preface:

Lo Apno Ke Beech Samarpit Tum Sa Apna Kaun?
Tum Prasann Ho Isase Badkar Sundar Sapana Kaun?

This was followed by another novel *Hum Bhi Insan Hei* based on the atrocities on the 'untouchables'. Its foreword was written by Amrit Lal Nagar. The next fictions were *Atmahatya* and *Sasikant*.

BT : There aren't many Hindi-speaking people who have gone to the far-off States in the South, learned the languages, become renowned writers and translators in the regional languages winning Akademi awards. But, you have proved that you could do it. Now, tell me what are your contributions to Malayalam language and literature?

SC : I have written five novels in Malayalam – *Nadi Samudratilekkutanne, Janmantaram, Chinnichitariya Mohangal, Teera Bhoomi, Antyaabhilaksham* — which have been widely discussed there. All of them have seen two editions each.

Initially I used to write poetry in Hindi. These used to be broadcast on All India Radio. One of them had become very popular. Later I realised that the era of poetry was over. I did not publish any

collection of poetry after *Sumananjali*. But the poet in me refused to sit idle. It was difficult to pen such poetry in Malayalam. So I wrote a song "Bade Chalo He Hind Veer". After that the age of songs was over. In those days I wrote a song beginning:

In Geetom Ka Sab Raag Betuka Hai Behad
Sab Kahate Hain Ab Kavita Likhna Band Karo

After *Sumananjali*, no collection of Hindi poems was published. So when I was restless, I used to write Malayalam poems. One such collection of poetry – *Kavithayude Kallukal* – was published. Noted Malayalam litterateur Kalppatta Balakrishnan wrote an eight-page introduction to this book.

Wherever I stayed, I always kept aloof from any groups – literary or political. I confined myself to the realm of literature.

BT : In Kerala, along with teaching, you were involved in publishing also. You also purchased a printing press. It is not an easy task for an ordinary mortal. But you did it despite the fact that you had reached there from north India. What was your experience in that field?

SC : I set up Bharatiya Sahitya Samiti in Trisshur. I published 35 books of various Malayalam writers under its auspices. I had organised a three-day function in connection with the release of these books. Later, I started Sudha Publications. I brought out six children's books from there. This was followed by four fictions and the Malayalam translation of *Amrit Aur Vish*. Other translations were Yash Pal's *Barah Ghantte* and *Kyom Phanse* and Chiranjit's *Tasvir Uski*. *Kalidasasarvaswom* in two parts was also brought out from here. It was released by Prof. Sidheshwar Prasad at a function in Trissur in 1975. It is significant to note here that when I had published my book Kalidasan Oru Padhanam, seven years prior to this publication, a noted publisher of that time, Thomas, who was the son of Professor Joseph Mundassery, had stated that a north Indian had no right to write in Malayalam. He had also warned that the book would be burnt. But such threats had no impact. Bharatiya Sahitya Samiti had published that book along with 34 books in other languages. Four editions of this book had come out till date. Many universities have included it as a reference book.

I had mentioned in *Kalidasan Oru Padhanam* that this is only a mini version of the book I wanted to write on Kalidasa. When Prof. Sidheswar Prasad had handed over a copy of *Kalidasasarvaswom* to Dr. K.P. Narayana Pisharody, he had made a mention of this

incident. Its introduction was written by noted scholar and writer Padmabhushan Sooranattu Kunjan Pillai. Most of its copies were sold through the State and Central governments. It was priced at Rs. 100/-. Sukumar Azhikode had mentioned then that none would buy the book for such a hefty price. However, after one advertisement, all copies were sold out at a pre-publication rate of Rs. 60/-. It was a rare book with original Sanskrit text and Prakrit text translated in verse. At that time another book on Kalidas - *Kalidasa Kritikal* - edited by N. V. Krishna Warrior was brought out. But it did not sell well. Sri Warrior was the editor of *Kunkumam Weekly* and he had written a critical appreciation in it on *Kalidasasarvaswom*. Then its second edition came out and its introduction was written by Sukumar Azhikode.

When *Kalidasa Kritikal* was published, I had told Warrior that such a betrayal should not have been done. He revealed to me that because of the wide demand for my book, he was forced by people to bring out the book. The second edition of my book was brought out by Padmabhushan D.C. Kizhakkemury who suggested to me to bring out an edition of *Kalidasasarvaswom* by Current Books. I told him that I am agreeable to the suggestion provided he was willing to bring out *Bhasanatakasarvaswom* along with *Kalidasasarvaswom*. The former had 1200 pages. Those days the financial position of Current Books was not very sound. He told me that he was not in a position to publish such a large book. Later D. C. agreed to the proposal. The book was limited to 1000 pages as small fonts were used. Then Current Books told me that they had already advertised the pages as 1200. So I had to write 200 pages of appendices. Dramas of Bhasa were staged in the form of Kootiyattam in Kerala. When I wrote 50 pages on Kootiyattam and sent it to Current Books they wrote me back saying they are unable to add any more pages. Their plea was that the book may not find much demand. But the fact was that the book was sold out even before it was printed. Later I got many letters seeking more copies, but the book had gone out of print. I even got a request for the book from the then Chief Secretary C. P. Nair, but I did not have a single copy with me. Later D. C. managed to send a copy to him. The introduction to the first edition of *Bhasanatakasarvaswom* was written by O. M. Anujan. The second edition's introduction was penned by K.P. Narayana Pisharody. It was published in 2001.

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BT : Now you are free from holding any post. There are not anymore any bindings on you. Even at your age, you work like any young man with energy and dynamism. What are your plans for the future?

SC : After retirement from the post of Principal, I had many good offers. But I did not take up any of them. I feel that whatever I wanted to give for literature, I have not been able to fulfill. So, after retirement, on the occasion of the golden jubilee celebration of the Geeta Private Limited, I brought out a collection of 50 Malayalam books. There are many unpublished works of mine in Hindi, Sanskrit and Malayalam. First of all I want to publish all of them. After that there are some other projects that I want to undertake.

One such project is the publication of *Valmiki Ramayan* in all the Indian languages. There are only 6666 slokas instead of the 24,000 in the *Valmiki Ramayan* I have abridged. There is no break in the continuity of the theme. I want this to be published in all Indian languages. Also I want the complete works of Kalidas and Bhasa to be brought out in all the Indian languages.

There is one thing that keeps my mind troubled—that although we give all facilities to the young generation, but they are not being given the lessons on our culture. Hence they lack self-confidence. I have written 23 children's books in Malayalam. I have plans to publish more books on our language, culture and achievements. I also want such books to be published with the help of pictures and caricastures in all Indian languages. There is also need to come out with multi-lingual dictionaries. Till now I have published two dictionaries – *Hindi-Hindi-Malayalam* and *Malayalam-Malayalam-Hindi*. There is also a small dictionary – *English-Hindi-Malayalam*.

My last desire is to set up a 'Self-realisation Foundation'. I am preparing the outlines of it. Its aim is to bring to light the traditions from the Vedic era to the modern times. The thoughts and ideology of the Rishis should find way to the present generation. Man must live like man and his only mission must be 'Self-realisation and betterment of the world'.

Translated from Hindi by Marydas John



Humayun Kabir's *Men and Rivers*

Raihan Raza

The relationship between man and nature, one of the oldest and grandest of literary themes, is explored by Humayun Kabir's *Men and Rivers*. The benevolence as well as the malevolence of nature stands contrasted and highlighted. Man's determination to succeed, in spite of all odds being against him, is also focussed upon. Though man does triumph over nature, usually due to his sustained effort over a long period of time, but nature has the power to obliterate all that he has achieved in a twinkle. So mighty is nature that not only does man lose everything in one stroke, but his life too stands threatened by those very forces that had sustained him. The novel delves deep into the benevolence as well as the malevolence of both, nature as well as human nature, by depicting the lives of Muslim farmers and peasants that live on the banks of the river Padma in the then East Bengal, with the "authenticity of an insider".(Naik, 174)

Humayun Kabir uses an impersonal narrative style by and large in this novel but is authorially omniscient, revealing the innermost thoughts and feelings of his characters. *Men and Rivers* is divided into three parts and these are further divided into chapters. The protagonist of the novel is Malek, a young boy who is nine years old when the novel begins. However, the tale is introduced from the point of view of Malek's father Nazu Mia. Part one firmly grounds the reader into the kind of man Nazu Mia is, his socio-economic, cultural and religious background is deftly revealed. When the novel begins, Nazu Mia stands on the bank of the river Padma in splendid isolation, ruminating:

> Nazu Mia breathed a sigh of relief and thankfulness. Allah was merciful and he had prospered. He remembered the days when, a young working lad, he first

came to the unsettled banks of the Padma. He had come with a group of older men. Peasants without any land of their own, they worked wherever they could. Often they travelled hundreds of miles in search of work.(5)

This was how things were when he first came to the banks of the Padma as a young, sixteen-year-old boy. They gained a foothold in the wilderness, on almost virgin soil by their hard work and enterprise. A settlement was eventually established due to this influx of immigrants. They succeeded in taming the land, but the river Padma remained its untamed moody self. Nazu Mia himself worked hard and Allah had been merciful and now he acknowledges that ". . . Allah had blessed his labours and today he had land and men and money, and honour in the eyes of his neighbours?"(8) Right from the outset of the story, and till the end, one character after another exhibits a sense of kinship and union with nature. In the introduction to the first part Nazu Mia compares his life to the Padma and is inspired by the river:

> No, those days were gone, gone beyond recall. The mad days of golden youth and the moments that crowd upon one another with excruciating joy. Now life was quiet and placid like the Padma on this fine morning in the late autumn. Something of the splendour of the rains still clung to her but the wildness and frenzy had gone. His life would henceforth be like this, full of kindliness but without the torrents and eddies of cruelty, suspicion and jealousy.
>
> Nazu Mia's heart filled with a sense of peace and gladness as he looked at the broad, placid river. He loved her with almost a physical passion as he remembered the days he had passed with her. His life was wedded to hers . . .(6)

Nazu Mia could not know it at this juncture, but not only was he wedded to river Padma in life but also in death, since later he met his end by drowning in this very river.

The life of Nazu Mia as well as that of all the other residents of the area largely depends on the river Padma and the land around it. Farming and fishing are their chief occupation. Right from the outset, Nazu Mia emerges as a man of principles. When a crocodile gets caught in his young son's fishing line and his mother Ayesha tries to dissuade him from going out in a boat in order to harpoon it, suggesting that

he send some one who is younger and stronger than him, he refuses to expose his workers to dangers that he did not dare face himself:

> If you tell me not to go, I won't go; but then I can never face these men again. They call me *Panchayat* and the whole village follows my lead. If it is once known that I sent others where I did not dare to go myself, will my face remain?(12-13)

Though he is of humble origins, Nazu Mia is a man with a sense of honour. He is ambitious and it is his hard work and ambition which have spurred him to wealth and power. Not only does he own acres of land, but is respected as well, by his workers as well as the rest of the village. He is the "acknowledged leader" (19) of "his locality" (19) and has been elected *Panchayat*. Early in the novel we learn that Nazu Mia is extremely jealous of one Asgar Mia who was once his "dearest friend" (8). So jealous is Nazu Mia of Asgar Mia that he even wonders why God almighty should be equally merciful to all?

> Allah was merciful but why should his mercy extend equally to all? In his own fields a happy harvest smiled, but the pleasure at the thought was almost spoiled when he remembered the bumper crop expected by his rival and enemy.(8)

Nazu Mia's fields are separated from those of Asgar Mia by a canal. This canal it seems serves not only as a physical border or division between the land of these two men, but as an emotional one as well.

A significant feature of village life that is very aptly described is the *haat* or weekly market at Dhuldi. It is "the centre of village life for miles around" (17). It functions not only as a market but also as the centre of all kinds of information and news that would be spread by word of mouth, at a very fast pace. That there would be all sorts of exaggerations and distortions is another hallmark of the conversation that is indulged in at this *haat*:

> Nazu Mia was not surprised when he learnt at Dhuldi that his young son, Malek, a lad of ten, had fought single-handed against a monster crocodile of full twenty feet and despatched it with a harpoon that clove through its brain at one stroke. (17)

A Hakim's shop is also situated at Dhuldi. There is a signboard

outside this shop which displays his name, though most of his patients are unlettered. The Hakim is respected for his learning though people laugh at the stories circulated about him by sceptics. The villagers come to him seeking a cure for all sorts of ailments. He prescribes a great variety of medicines which include pills, magic water and verses from the holy Quran. Inside the shop, in keeping with the life style of Hakims of the day is a platform covered with a white cloth called a *farash*. There are cushions on this *farash*. The Hakim reclines on them while waiting for his patients, smoking a hurdy-gurdy. An incident that brings out Nazu Mia's character happens in this very shop. On one of the days of this *haat* the Hakim calls Nazu Mia to his shop with great eagerness and requests him to sit on the *farash*. This is indeed an honour since he had never been seated on the *farash* before, though he had visited the Hakim's shop quite often. Nazu Mia is also offered first use of the hurdy-gurdy or *hookah* as a mark of respect. Soon Nazu Mia learns the reason for all this honour being heaped on him. The Hakim wants the spleen of the crocodile killed by Nazu Mia. In their system of medicine, the crocodile's spleen could cure rheumatism and gout and general debility. A medicine prepared from it could make one "feel twenty years younger" (20). He also requests for the crocodiles liver, since it increased "strength and courage" (20). But Nazu Mia informs him that the entire body of the crocodile except the skin, teeth and claws was thrown into the river. On learning this, all the good manners and respect that the Hakim had shown to Nazu Mia vanish. It was all just a facade to get what he wanted from Nazu Mia. So disappointed is the Hakim that he wants to insult Nazu Mia some-how or the other. First he points out that Nazu Mia's feet are unshod and he should wear shoes. But this does not have the desired impact so the Hakim without mincing words says that Nazu Mia should wash his feet when he is asked to sit on a gentleman's *farash*. This time the Hakim manages to hit the nail on the head and Nazu Mia feels insulted. In a cold manner, keeping a check on his temper, Nazu Mia retorts: "I am a peasant's son and don't know the manners of gentlemen. But we peasants never invite a man and then insult him in our house. Good, bye."(22) This incident exposes the cunning, the greed and bad manners of one who calls himself a gentleman. Comparatively speaking Nazu Mia, the uneducated peasant emerges taller and more of a gentleman than the Hakim.

The world of *Men and Rivers* is untouched by today's technology, perversity, cunning and complicated theorizing. In all pre-modern societies like this one, religion, superstition and tradition form the basis of social

life. This is true of the society portrayed in this novel as well. Dhuldi being the centre of village life in the area becomes the chosen home of a, Faqir who establishes his residence under a large banyan tree which is hollow in the centre. There is a vivid description of the Faqir and the crowd that gathers around him:

> There the Faqir had built his den and sat in saffron robes. He wore a green turban to indicate that he was a *Saiyed*,– one who claimed descent from the holy Prophet himself. He sat on a small mat and silently told his beads or a *tasbih*. A crowd of idlers – some young, some old, with a sprinkling of women among them – stood in a circle around his den. They nudged one another, and whispered in excitement. They wanted to ask the Faqir questions about their troubles and their future, but nobody dared to disturb him.(24)

Then, an old woman gathering sufficient courage asks the Faqir if she might ask a question? To the utter amazement and thrill of the assembled uneducated villagers the Faqir voices the question which the old woman had not even uttered as yet. At this, the old woman flings herself at the Faqir's feet in reverence, asking a number of questions about her lost son Mati. Deftly, the Faqir gives her answers which could not be proved wrong, avoiding and refusing to answer questions that require exact answers:

> 'When will he come?' asked the old woman eagerly, but the Faqir had already turned to another man who was frantically trying to catch his eye. The old woman would not give up so easily and kept clamouring for a reply. The Faqir turned severely on her and said, 'Don't seek to know too much. Knowledge is the cause of misery. At times a glimpse of the future is vouchsafed to the holy man. Do not try to lift the veil higher than you can bear. Who am I to tell you of your son's fate?(24 - 25)

Catering to the universal weakness of man to remain young, forever, the Faqir promises to help an old man regain his lost vitality. Consequently the young men disdain him. But the Faqir succeeds in winning the trust of the older men and women who are present. Soon the news spreads that "a Faqir with miraculous powers had come to the *haat*." It is made clear by the omniscient narrator that the Faqir very cleverly gleans whatever information he requires, from the crowd around him and uses it to the best of his advantage:

> Ramzan hurried to call his master. While he was away, the Faqir in a few deft questions gleaned from the audience as much as he wanted to know of Nazu Mia's life. This he did so skilfully that hardly anybody felt that the Faqir was trying to pump out information.(29)

The Faqir had gathered from Ramzan's conversation with another man that Nazu Mia had killed a crocodile and understood immediately that Nazu Mia was a person of some importance. So he expresses a desire to meet him. When Nazu Mia arrives the Faqir flatters him by treating him in a special manner and succeeds in drawing him out. Nazu Mia unburdens his heart and begs the Faqir to pray for him. But now, the Faqir snubs him and sends him away without revealing what the future has in store for him and his family though Nazu Mia protests that since it was the Faqir who had sent for him, he should tell him why he had been called. When Nazu Mia is leaving the Faqir's lodgings, events take a dramatic turn with the advent of Asgar Mia and the resultant heated argument between these two men. The Faqir who had wished that Nazu Mia leave him alone and had supposedly sunk into a trance and did not want to be disturbed, comes out of his trance and his den, greets Asgar Mia in a cordial manner and accompanies him inside his den. This makes Nazu Mia more angry than ever and in his wrath he enters the den after them. The Faqir retains his composure though he is accused by Nazu Mia of being a charlatan and of betraying him to Asgar Mia, his rival. Encouraged by Nazu Mia's angry accusations the crowd enters the Faqir's den. Things could have taken a violent turn but, the Faqir, emerging as an accomplished master of his craft, starts reciting verses that none in the crowd could understand. Then in a state of frenzy he makes predictions which impress the uneducated people:

> . . . 'Get back, get back, you fools, for on you is a great calamity, and yet you are fighting among yourselves. The river shall rise and land and water shall be one. For Nazu Mia, I see a stormy evening when the clouds gather and the waters boil. Your best friend will be your worst enemy and your worst enemy will be your best friend. Beware, beware when the wind is from the north-east and the cloudy eagle rises in the sky. Asgar and Nazu, Nazu and Asgar—what a strange pattern of love, and hatred and suffering Allah weaves with you!'(34)

One does not need to foresee the future in order to predict that the banks of the Padma will be ravished by floods. The other prediction

concerning Nazu Mia's and Asgar Mia's relationship with each other is no prediction what so ever because enough is already known about it. Since it was Nazu Mia who had emerged as the aggressor it is believed that he is cursed by the Faqir. From the point of view of the unlettered villagers the Faqir had foreseen the future and all except Nazu Mia are suitably impressed. Though Nazu Mia is as uneducated as the rest, yet he is a man with an exceptionally strong will and believes that it is Allah who directs the course of events: "After all, who is more powerful, Allah or a Faqir? Can a thousand Faqirs change a jot of what Allah wills?"(39) Predictions and curses of Faqirs whom he regards as charlatans do not impress him: "Why do you take it so seriously, *Ammajan*? A charlatan has set up a trade in prophecies and charms. He can never be a real Faqir. His curses are mere words—wind that leaves no trace behind."(37) Incidents such as this one, involving Faqirs are very common in the kind of society portrayed in *Men and Rivers*. They succeed in bringing out the true flavour of village life of the period. Nazu Mia, in keeping with the actual teachings of Islam is not a superstitious man. Though the omniscient narrator makes it clear that the Faqir is a pretender but by a strange co-incident Nazu Mia meets his death when he is crossing the Padma and is caught in a storm, though after the Faqir's curse, it was not his first journey across the river. Nazu Mia, decided to cross the Padma in order to collect the rent from his tenants to enable him to pay the revenue to the *Dewan* in time. His worker Idris tries to dissuade him since the season in which storms generally occur is not over as yet, but to no avail. His mother Ayesha also tries to persuade him not to go just then, but she too does not succeed. Nazu Mia argues:

> ... 'Life will be impossible if one has to live in continual fear like this. After all, men must fight the elements in order to live, and we have fought the Padma all our lives. We know her moods, *Ammajan*. There is nothing to fear today.'(54)

Nazu Mia, accompanied by his men, sets out in a boat to cross the river, determined to return the next day. But while they are at mid stream a powerful wind starts to blow which soon becomes a raging storm. The men in the boat are caught in the full fury of the storm. The wind roars and the river answers. Water, a life giving force, gets converted into one that causes death and destruction. Padma, the very river which has brought Nazu Mia prosperity, has transformed him from a pauper to one who owns acres, claims him for its own and then:

> The storm ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Perhaps it lasted an hour—perhaps less. Even after the storm was over, the Padma rolled in long swinging waves. A few clouds still hung in the east and the sun went down in a blaze of glory.(58)

The sun going down in a blaze of glory becomes a metaphor for man ranged against the elements. Nazu Mia emerges as a man among men.

The second part of the novel begins with the shock of Nazu Mia's death by drowning. After his demise his mother Ayesha lives in acute agony, for seven days. Then, one night, leaving Malek her grandson asleep in bed all by himself she quietly goes to the bank of the river Padma. There, that very night she is found, dead. After Nazu Mia's death, Malek had been placed in Ayesha's arms and it was hoped that it would rekindle Ayesha's desire to live. But this was not to be. Malek and his property now pass into the care of old Basir who becomes Malek's guardian. The two maids Kulsum and Gulabi look after the house and the young boy. Malek misses both his father and grandmother. However, in the daytime, little games that children of his age play, keep him engaged. But every night Malek cries profusely till, overcome by fatigue, he falls asleep. With the passage of time and under Kulsum's care he slowly starts to overcome his sorrow. He begins to play happily with the other children. To the utter delight of Malek, one day, Basir presents him a toy bow and a quiver of arrows. He goes around the village proudly displaying his new possession. Malek makes some friends and some foes. While at play he also indulges in fights and proves his mettle. A little girl called Nuru becomes his special friend and so does a boy called Sabu. Through the course of the novel the character of Malek grows and develops rapidly. A significant development from the point of view of the growth and development of both Malek as well as the plot of the novel is the special bond that gets established between Malek and Nuru who turns out to be the daughter of Nazu Mia's arch rival Asgar Mia. Right from the beginning of their association, Nuru is concerned about the welfare of Malek. On the day when Malek is showing off his toy bow and arrows and the other boys start fighting with him, it is Nuru who informs Basir and sees to it that the fight comes to an end. Again, when in response to Sabu's provocation Malek swims too far into the river, Nuru gets quite concerned and frightened:

> Silently he waddled to the shore. Nuru came rushing up. 'Why did you go so far? I was so frightened,' she said.

'But there is nothing to fear,' Malek assured her.
'Suppose a crocodile had got you,' argued Nuru.
'It would have made no difference. My father and granny both are dead,' he said.
'If you are so rash again, I shall not talk to you,' said Nuru and her eyes were brimful of tears.(77)

At this juncture the tale takes an expected turn which helps to keep the interest alive. In his capacity as Malek's guardian, Basir has been trying hard to get the tenants pay the rent for the land in their possession but fails to succeed. In these regions of the Bengal of the time muscle power is needed in order to get the tenants to pay rent. Those very tenants who paid their rent regularly to Nazu Mia refuse to pay to Basir, since he is old and does not have any muscle men at his command. Since Asgar Mia has been elected *Panchayat* after Nazu Mia's death, Basir feels that Malek's land can be entrusted to him. He is in a position to collect the rent and pay the revenue, keeping Malek's inheritance intact. This suggestion is resisted by Gulabi and Kulsum who argue that since Asgar Mia has been Nazu Mia's bitterest enemy he could use this opportunity to deprive Nazu Mia's son of his inheritance. However, Basir is of the opinion that this is possible but not probable since Asgar Mia would not like to lose his reputation of being an honest man. Keeping his negative relationship will Nazu Mia in mind, people will keep him under close observation. Also, since Asgar Mia has no son and his daughter Nuru is fond of Malek, it could occur to Asgar Mia to marry the two of them to each other. After all, says Basir, before Nazu Mia and Asgar Mia quarrelled they were so friendly that one could compare them to two flowers on the same stalk. With no other option in hand, for better or for worse Basir makes an effort to entrust Malek and his lands in the care of Asgar Mia. A meeting of the village elders is called by Asgar Mia in order to make some arrangements about Malek's lands. At the meeting Basir admits that he is too old and consequently unable to compel the tenants to pay rent. The village elders realize that the situation is a difficult one. The elders are suspicious of Basir's suggestion that Asgar Mia should take Malek's lands and pay him an annual rent. One is informed by the omniscient narrator that the elders want that justice should be done but are unwilling to shoulder the burden since they are over burdened with their own work. They ask Asgar Mia what his intension happens to be? Asgar Mia seems to have thought over the problem at length. Emphasizing the gravity of the situation he points out how it is especially difficult for him to assume this responsibility:

It is difficult for me to take Malek's lands on lease. You know, my brothers, my relation with the late Nazu Mia (may Allah rest his soul in peace). Now he is dead and death should wipe out all enmity. But the human heart is weak and evil tongues wag. What shall I say? If I agree, many of you will think it is a trick to cheat Malek out of his patrimony. Even if I should try my best, there will be some who will be suspicious and evil-minded, and perhaps evil-tongued as well. We are farmers and know that there are good years and bad. Whatever I might do, people will say I have not done enough. And yet, if I don't agree to take the land, what will happen to Malek? He cannot control his tenants and will lose what he has. Shall not be blamed by men, but how shall I answer to Allah on the day of Judgement? In the name of Allah I swear that if any of you are willing to take the land on lease, I shall wash my hands of it. Then perhaps I shall have peace and also keep my good name.(105-106)

Since no one comes forward to take the land on lease, Asgar Mia accepts the responsibility, swearing in the name of Allah and Prophet Mohammad, to be just and fair:

I swear in the name of Allah and His Prophet that I shall strive my utmost to be just and fair. May His anger burn me up if I should defraud an orphan of even a jot of his property. Every year, on full-moon day in *Baisakh*, I shall give an account of my stewardship to the meeting of the village elders, and if I err or go wrong, I shall submit to any chastisement that you might impose.(106)

It is worth being highlighted that though the government of the day collects the revenue in time without fail, it is totally unconcerned with the law and order. Bribe taking is rampant as is evident from the offer of the *Dewan's* clerk to transfer the lands to Basir if he pays him some money, when Basir complains to him about the tenant's refusal to pay rent. What ever law and order that exists, is maintained by the local population itself. Rahimpur, like the other villages of the area has a committee of elders to settle local disputes. This appears to be the effort of the villagers themselves. It is not safe to keep money in the house. This is clear from Kulsum's observation that if Malek's land is sold, the money will have to be kept in the house. This is not safe because so much money in the house would serve as an invitation for robbers

to come and loot them. There seem to be no banks in the area. The police appear to be non-existent. Courts of law are also significantly absent. A government which does not provide security and other amenities to the local population but is prompt in collecting the revenue does not have any legitimacy and is condemnable. It can be argued, however, that the land is there and the villagers can take as much of it as they want and that there is no interference from the government at this level. But even so, the havoc that the Padma causes intermittently is always present as a danger that clouds their horizon: "In the background there always loomed the threat from the Padma, Padma the hungry serpent who had swallowed families and homesteads beyond count"(104). If the crops fail, be it due to drought or floods, the villagers are left to their own devices. On the whole it is a difficult and uncertain life.

Asgar Mia's character grows and develops through the course of the novel. He is transformed from being Nazu Mia's arch rival to becoming the real protector and guardian of Nazu Mia's son. Soon Malek is "like a son to him"(107). He adjusts well in his new home. While Asgar Mia works in the fields Malek waits for him, sitting on the harrow. As soon as Asgar Mia sits down under the shade of a tree to rest Malek prepares his *hookah* for him and lights a fire for his smoke. In the afternoon Malek goes home and brings lunch for him. Though still a boy, sometimes when there is an additional burden of work and insufficient farm hands, Malek also works in the fields. Quite often, while idle Malek carves small toys for Nuru out of pieces of bamboo. In the evening Asgar Mia and Malek return home together, like father and son. The friendship between Nuru and Malek also flowers. Both do little things for each other.

An incident which is significant from the point of view of the social customs of the inhabitants of that area is the marriage of Kulsum with Aziz. Kulsum was Nazu Mia's maid servant. She is a young widow in her twenties. Due to her love and concern for Malek she shifts to Asgar Mia's house along with him. However she soon realizes that Nuru's mother makes every effort to keep her away from Malek, setting her tasks that minimize her contact with him. Kulsum resents this immensely and even complains to Basir accusing Nuru's mother of being a witch:

> "She has bewitched Malek. How else to explain why Malek who was so fond of me never comes near me now? And she won't let him. Whenever Malek comes into the house, she sends me away on some pretext or other. 'Kulsum, do this,' 'Kulsum, do that.' As if I didn't see through her wiles. I tell you, Basir *chacha*, she has bewitched Malek."(112)

Nuru's mother Amina, a good looking, soft spoken woman solves this problem by deciding to marry off Kulsum. Since Islam encourages remarriage of widows she succeeds in this quite easily. Amina confers with her husband Asgar Mia that since Kulsum's behaviour towards Malek is likely to spoil him and also because she is a young widow she should be married off to someone who is suitable. So, Asgar Mia arranges Kulsum's marriage with Aziz who is about thirty five years old. But Kulsum is not ready to marry anyone. However, on the day fixed for the marriage, an unwilling Kulsum is married off with the help of an old trick which makes a mockery of the right given to a woman in Islam to agree or refuse to marry a man. In Islam, marriage is a contract between two adults of the opposite sex. The woman's consent is essential for the marriage to take place. When asked whether she agrees to marry the person named, she has to categorically state yes or no. She is asked thrice. When Kulsum is asked whether she is willing to accept Aziz as her husband Kulsum keeps quiet and lowers her head because she is scared that Aziz Mia will get angry if she says no. The women who have assembled for the wedding had taken hold of her head and make it nod:

> Thrice Basir asked the question, 'Kulsum, do you agree to marry Aziz?'
>
> She made no reply, but every time, some of the women caught hold of her head and made her nod.
>
> 'She has given her consent,' said Nuru's mother.(117)

Often, illiterate Muslim women the world over are still fooled into marriage like this. A marriage of this nature has no place in Islam. Imperfect knowledge of Islamic law is the root cause of such malpractices. In the first part of the novel when Nazu Mia arrives at the Faqir's den there is a reference to the disciples of the Faqir reading the Quran aloud in Arabic, the language in which it was bestowed on Prophet Mohammad. Nazu Mia asks the disciple to tell him the meaning of the verses. The disciple is astonished: "The meaning of the verses? But we don't know the meaning. Aren't they the words of Allah? That is enough for us;"(42) The point is that if the translation of the Quran is read along side, many a misconception will be removed and true knowledge will spread leading to a better quality of life.

The drought and floods that occur in the second part of the novel are significant from the point of view of the growth and development of the plot as well as the growth and development of the chief characters. The novel also sheds light on the plight of the population in general in times such as these. The rains fail for two consecutive years. Consequently

a drought sweeps the entire area. Even a well to do farmer like Asgar Mia is exposed to scarcity and want. Famished men, women and children, cattle dying due to starvation, a blazing sun over head, the parched earth and fields bereft of crops become a familiar landscape. Robberies increase. In one case a merchant disappears along with his grain. By the end of the second year of the drought Asgar Mia and his family have exhausted whatever stores of grain they had. All their cattle except two bullocks have been killed. The entire family has become lean and thin. Now after two years it rains and rains heavily for four days and nights. The Padma overflows its banks and there is floods water all around:

> When morning broke at last, it was a strange and desolate world that the survivors saw. Familiar landmarks had been swept away. There was hardly any trace of the village. A few fallen-in roofs indicated where the houses had been. On the vast desolation of waters floated a few boats—black spots that were a pathetic symbol of man's insignificance before the elemental forces of nature.(124)

The Padma had changed course and now flowed over what had been Asgar Mia's and Malek's lands. This brings about a complete reversal in their fortunes. They loose all their lands, as well as their house and become homeless and penniless wanderers as a result of this deluge. Asgar Mia is distraught but for Malek it is a major experience and he does not despair.

The introduction to part three of the novel has similarities with the introduction to part one. Change in pre-modern societies is often circular. In *Men and Rivers* things seem to have come a full circle. Malek now a young man of nineteen, stands and looks across the sea in much the same way as his father Nazu Mia in the introduction to part one of the novel, had stood on the bank of the river Padma and thought about his past. Then, Nazu Mia was a successful man, at the height of his success, contemplating over the sweet and sour events of his life. He was a self-made man. Now, in the same manner Malek, stands on a small hill gazing at the sea and thinks about his past. In part three the Malek that one meets is also a self made man. He has survived a devastating flood that ravished his home and fields and rendered him homeless and possession less. He is now settled in Byanchar, a virgin island along with Asgar Mia and Nuru. Hard work has transformed them into prosperous farmers:

> ... Asgar Mia had again grown into a prosperous farmer. Malek had prospered with him, for the lands were held jointly in their names. Their fields were large and they could no longer till the lands themselves. They employed farm-hands. Some of the men who had formerly worked for Asgar Mia found their way to Byanchar.
>
> Inside the house, Nuru queened over all. Even Asgar Mia submitted to her gentle rule, and as for Malek, he would have laid down his life at her bidding.
>
> A deep feeling of gratitude overwhelmed Malek as he stood on the hill by the seashore and looked across the waves. 'Allah is merciful,' he said and slowly turned towards the house.(129)

Here, Malek exhibits the same demeanour and contentment that was exhibited by Nazu Mia his father in the introduction to part one of the novel:

> Allah is merciful, he said. How could he forget that he had started life with two bare hands, but Allah had blessed his labours and today he had land and men and money, and honour in the eyes of his neighbours?(8)

Like his father he too is a self-made man. An emotion common to both father and son is a sense of gratitude to Allah for providing sustenance. Both acknowledge that the Almighty is merciful. Malek is now well settled in Byanchar along with Asgar Mia and Nuru. However Nuru's mother is no more. She was unable to survive the hardships they faced since the flood. One day, during the early days of their struggle for survival in Byanchar she dies:

> Like the last parting kick of a malignant fate, there was one blow still waiting for Asgar Mia. He brought his small family to Byanchar and made a small clearing in the forest where he built a hut. Poor Nuru's mother could not reconcile herself to the change in her fate. One morning she did not get up from her bed. Nuru called to her but she would not listen and Nuru flung herself upon her mother's body and wept as if her heart would break.(128)

Here, Humayun Kabir's concept of a malignant fate is similar to that of Thomas Hardy. In spite of his many losses Malek is satisfied since he owns a lot of land jointly with Asgar Mia. He is also quite happy because he is in love with Nuru and she reciprocates his love. The story

takes another turn here with the disappearance of Malek. Asgar Mia searches for him himself as well as sends out search parties, but to no avail. Malek is not found. Both Asgar Mia as well as Nuru grieve deeply. Over a month passes with no news of Malek and all except Asgar Mia, Nuru and Aziz lose all hope. Then, one day Malek returns. We learn that while sailing on the stream in his small boat on his way to the hillock by the sea where Nuru's mother was buried, he had been carried out to the sea by a strong current. Once there, he had been captured by pirates. This part of the novel provides information which exposes a weakness in the construction of the plot. Malek's and Nuru's love for one another and their desire to get married is instrumental in revealing that Nuru's mother before she married Asgar Mia was married to Nazu Mia. Malek was born as a result of this marriage. Nuru and Malek are brother and sister. Hence marriage between them is a taboo. It also becomes apparent that a love triangle was the cause of friends becoming enemies. The plot is weakened by too many romantic incidents of this nature. Malek blames Asgar Mia for keeping such important things a secret. In Nazu Mia's life time battle lines were clearly drawn between him and Asgar Mia. But after the demise of Nazu Mia it is possible for Asgar Mia to forget old enmity and give Malek the love and protection of a father most probably because his wife wishes it. Though in the beginning his love for his wife may have been instrumental in this but with the passage of time Asgar Mia begins to love Malek in reality. The way he searches for and waits and grieves for Malek when he is abducted by Mang Po establishes this beyond doubt. Asgar Mia emerges an honest and compassionate man. Neither Asgar Mia nor Amina reveal the truth to both the children because they want to protect their "young lives from the shadow of doubt"(182). Malek and Nuru both are distraught. Malek blames Asgar Mia for keeping this a secret but Nuru understands her father's predicament and suffering. Though Malek questions: "How can I look upon Nuru as my sister now? All my youth's dreams were woven round her—will a word unweave them so suddenly?"(183), yet he does not break the religious and social custom that there can be no marriage between brother and sister and walks out of the life of Asgar Mia and Nuru. At this point, the symbolic significance of an episode in part two of the novel in which Malek and Nuru as small children are found stuck in the mud of the canal that separated Asgar Mia's home from that of Nazu Mia becomes apparent.

The canvas of *Men and Rivers* has been largely painted with the metaphor of the river. Here, the ebb and flow of the river becomes a part of the ebb and flow of life. Affirming this Asgar Mia says: "We are men of the river. We are peasants. We build our homes on sand

and the water washes them away. We build again and again, and we till the earth and bring the golden harvest out of the waste land"(183). Sustaining the metaphor Malek replies: "I also am a son of the river. I too must build my home on sand. But the old must die before the new can be born. I must go away, Asgar *chacha*, and who knows, perhaps one day I might return"(183). Asgar Mia murmurs to himself: "The river must change its course and leave behind old familiar banks. But the river returns. It never forgets the old channels"(183). Like natural things the life of human beings is seen to have a cyclic pattern. All the major characters in *Men and Rivers* fight against nature in much the same way as the old man in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Some times the dice is loaded in their favour and some times against them but nature is infinitely much more powerful than any individual. In spite of this the spirit of man triumphs.

Some of the minor characters in the novel like Basir who does not even contemplate depriving Malek of his lands even though the *Dewan's* clerk suggests a way of doing so, Kulsum and Gulabi who sincerely love and protect the orphaned child Malek to the best of their ability exhibit the virtues of honesty and integrity and endear themselves to the reader. The appeal of *Men and Rivers* lies in its theme which possesses in itself ". . . a substantial value and a genuine human meaning . . ." (Hudson, 132) because it is concerned ". . . with passions, conflicts and problems which . . . belong to the essential texture of life . . . which make life strenuous, intense, and morally significant" (Hudson, 132). Though it can be argued that the plot of *Men and Rivers* has ". . . too many romantic joints—a love-triangle making bosom friends sworn enemies; lovers suddenly discovering that they are children of the same mother" (Naik, 174) but in spite of this a major strength of the novel is a sense of unity in its plot-structure. The three parts of the novel are dove-tailed together in much the same way as the lives of Nazu Mia, Asgar Mia and Malek are entwined with each other.

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Ram as Folk Hero in the "Ramains" of Himachal Pradesh

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The *Ramyana* finds many expressions in the folk literature of Himachal Pradesh and different regions of the state have interspersed and interpenetrative gathas, geets and kathas—ballads, songs and narratives, as well as drama relating to the chief incidents in the *Ramayana*. This kaleidoscopic synergy of seamless blending of forms can be aptly described through the metaphor of a Pahari snack, muri, which is a mixture of grain, with nuts, prunes, raisins, et cetera. Different areas of the hill state display variations in the choice and ratio of the ingredients. The basic component in the Pahari *Ramayans*, the "Ramains," is the name, personality, character and exploits of Ram in the popular consciousness, within the cultural contexts of the Pradesh.

The first effort to compile and write the various Ramains in Himachal was made in 1974 by the Himachal Academy of Arts, Culture and Languages, to commemorate the 400th year of Tulsi's *Ramcharitamanas*. Recently, the Academy has published another seminal work entitled: *Himachal Pradesh: Ramkatha ke Lokprasang*, which supplements the earlier groundbreaking work. Although, Himachal Pradesh primarily worships Shiva and Shakti, and most local deities are emanates of these principal deities, Krishna and Ram also find significant space in the lives of the Himachal folk. In district Kangra, the Ramaini is performed as Aihnchali in verse and prose by the worker communities, Ghirth and Jheer, as well as the Gaddi tribe (Vyathit 7-8; Sharma, Jagdish 13). The nuptial songs, suhag, and the birth songs, *bansnu-khelnu* also recount the wedding of Ram-Sita and the birth of Ram. In the area of lower Mahasu and parts of Mandi and Bilaspur districts, the folk ballad-drama, Barlaj was performed, in addition to Aihnchali (Anand 35-40). However, Barlaj is almost extinct

today with all its traditional performers either dead or very old. The Barlaj is divided into Ramain (early years of Ram), Rathaula (the hunt of Marich) and Chhokra (Sita's abduction and after). The first Barlaj begins with the stories of Creation and of Vali-Vamanavatar.

In almost all versions of the Pahari Ramains, the focus is on Sitaharan, the abduction of Sita, with Hauran being performed by itself in several areas. In the villages of Kullu valley, *hauran* is performed from the last day of Dussehra to fifteenth Pausha, or even till Basant Panchami (Thakur, Molu Ram 89; Thakur, Kamlesh 26). This period corresponds to the coldest part of winter, after the harvest and before the next sowing. In the *hauran*, two men stand one behind the other, bending forward from the waist. A painted, coarse woollen cloth (pattu) is slung over them. On the head of the man in front, deer horns shaped out of hemp are fixed and decorated with flowers. This 'deer' gambols while two other men dance, one in the guise of a woman. After a determined time, the 'couple' stop the dance and, wearing masks, act out the dramatic performance, *swang*. It is said that Hanuman and some of his associates disguised themselves as rakshasas and went to Lanka to look for Sita. Hanuman asked Ravan for permission to perform *hauran* in remembrance of the sacrifice made by his uncle, Marich who had lured Ram away in the form of the golden deer and given up his life to fulfil Ravan's desire. Ravan gave them permission and they performed *hauran* from house to house. While the four performers engaged the people in the *hauran*, others quickly searched the house for Sita. When they did not find her they signalled this to the performers with a loud 'ha-ha' who immediately left-off their act and the party moved to another house. When they finally did find Sita in the Ashok Vatika, they cried out 'hee-hee' and the *hauran* search concluded. 'Hee' in some dialects of Pahari also indicates 'is here,' which makes the alliterative and dramatic cry, meaningful as well. In Kinnaur, fifteen days of the month of Magha are devoted to singing songs about Lord Ram with emphasis on Sita *haran*. This is done to protect themselves from being overpowered by demons, spirits and departed souls while the local deities are away to Kinner Kailash to participate in the annual Pasa Tournament hosted by Shiva. Thus, Ram is not a "Shu" or local devata to the Kinnauri mind (Negi 20).

However, Sri Raghunath ji, who desired to leave Ayodhya and settle in the picturesque valley, is the reigning deity of Kullu and surrounding areas (Thakur, Vidya 119; Swati 115-118). The Ramain of this region, as well as those of Una, Kangra, Nirmand and Mahasu add considerable detail and local elements to the received events of the main source, Tulsi's

Ramcharitmanas, especially to the birth of Ram, Sita *haran* and Ram's search for his wife. For instance, the Jubbal-Kotkhai Ramain has the Pandavas fighting alongside Ram at Lanka; it also has the Pathans and Mughals fighting in Ram's army with cannons and gunpowder:

Nau lakh ghora chalo paulgai
Chhah lakh Mughlau Pathano. ...
(Singh 93)

The folk singer of Kullu sums up the Ramain into a pithy couplet for the man who had fallen asleep during the performance of the Ram Katha, only to awaken in the morning to enquire whether Sita was a man or a woman. The *kathayaru* tells him:

Ravanai Neu Rama ra baur
Ta Rame phuku, Ravana ra ghaur
Yai sa Ramaina.

(Ravan stole Ram's wife so he burnt down his house;
This is the Ramayana).
(Thakur, Vidya 121)

This encapsulation of the *Ramayana* marks the simple and easily comprehensible terms of the Pahari Ramains. In this body of synchronous literature, the hero, Ram is cast in the mould of the familiar and reflects local attitudes, belief and demeanour. For instance, in the Mandi Ramaini, Ram evinces many easily identifiable characteristics to the people of the region. In one episode Ram is seen making ready to go to court for a hearing:

Kamleya mahanua, utth chal Ram kachahriya jana ho
Utth chal dera Ram kachahriya lana ho.
(Ram, Kanshi 67)

In the vein of the most recently wed young men, Ram humours Sita in the early days of their marriage by promising to buy her gifts of clothes and jewellery to adorn herself with:

Sira re saluye paibno meri Janaki
Orbo meri Janaki, tay mera mann moheya. ...
(Ram, Kanshi 68)

As a young boy Ram is shown to be fond of fine clothes and good food:

Dudh dubna chaliyan o balaka
. ...
Savere re tarke kapreyan dhona chaliya Rama
O balaka kapareyan reya shaukinya. ...
(Ram, Kanshi 64)

The contrast with the life in exile later on in the narrative is thus built-up by the folk narrator. In many areas of Himachal, including district Mandi, military service is the chosen field by most able-bodied men. Thus, in another episode, Ram is described as a soldier who has gone to fight Ravan beyond the borders, while back home people wait anxiously for his letter:

Kithi ta rehende mere Raghurai ve
Chitthi Ram bali aaj bhi na ayi ve.
(Ram, Kanshi 63)

In this context Ram is primarily seen as a warrior, with valour being at a premium in the rugged life of the Himalayas. A man of prowess, he is also obstinate and dogged. The Nirmand Ramain relates this strong-minded aspect of the folk hero. When the queen mothers are preparing to perform *sati* with their deceased king, Kaikeyi pauses near the pyre and Ram asks her the reason for this hesitation. She replies that she would jump into the flaming pyre if he promised in the next birth he would be born from her womb. Ram concedes her request but maintains that he would not feed himself from her breast in that lifetime but would drink his mother Kaushalya's milk. Kaikeyi snorts and tells him that he will be a baby then and she would forcibly breastfeed him. However, it is Ram's will that prevails and he is born as Krishna in the next avatar; Kaikeyi becomes Devaki and Kaushalya is reborn as Yashoda (Sharma, Deepak 109-10).

Further, Ram is also seen as an everymans brother, husband and householder. As an elder brother, Ram advises Laxman to complete and perfect his knowledge and sends him in search of Guru Goraknath (Atrey *Lokprasang* 138-39). In Mandi, Hanuman is said to be Ram's maternal uncle—a possible reference to the oft-repeated teasing phrase: 'bandar tera mama,' your uncle is a monkey. In another version, Ram is Hanuman's mama. One day they sit eating off the same plate. In the first account, after every morsel Hanuman surreptitiously washes his hands to keep the food pure for Ram. In the latter, he does the same only to tease Ram later that he had allowed Hanuman to eat *jootha*. Ram smiles and informs him that he had done no such thing as he too had washed his hand

after every bite. This clearly alludes to the local view that a nephew is to be honoured and must always be served untouched food (Atrey *Pahari* 55 and *Lokprasang* 136).

Recognizable patterns of family tensions and undercurrents find clear expression in the folk Ramains of Sirmaur and Kullu. When Ram and Laxman return after killing Marich to find Sita missing, Ram suspects Laxman of having hidden her (Thakur, Molu 88; Chauhan 78). This is an obvious reference to the formerly widespread, institution of polyandry in these areas. Ram wants to kill Laxman but asks him to first cook and eat food, as it is wrong to kill a hungry man. Laxman does not argue with his elder brother, aware that jealousy and suspicion preclude reasoning. Instead, he vainly tries to light the hearth with one piece of firewood. When Ram points out that he must use at least two pieces of wood to get the fire going, Laxman replies:

Kelbe dale ni khaan
Kehle bhaiye ni maan.

(One log cannot cook food and
One brother alone is no good).
(Thakur, Vidya 128)

In the Kullu Ramain, Sita accuses Laxman that he has his eye on her and so does not want to go in search of Ram who has followed the golden deer (Thakur, Vidya 126). This is an obvious reference to the rather fluid relationship of brother-in-law and sister-in-law, where marriage between the two was possible and not uncommon. Stung by her allegation, Laxman cannot help but refer to her adopted status and her unknown lineage when Ram and he come back with the skin of the golden deer to find Sita gone (Thakur, Vidya 127). This could be a subtle reference to the practice of *reet*, in which the woman leaves her husband's house out of choice to live with another. The chosen man would then be required to pay a determined amount to the previous husband and the matter would be thus settled. Although this custom had social sanction, still, there was disapproval attached to it and women were discouraged from it in the name of family honour. Laxman's words echo this censure.

In the Ramains of Kangra and Chamba, Ram is suspicious of Sita who takes inordinately long to return with water from the well. He shares his misgivings with Laxman and wonders whether she has left him and gone back to her parents' home, or was she lost in idle gossip with her friends. When Sita returns to find her husband and brother-in-law casting aspersions on her, she is furious and says that she will

break and burn their bows and arrows for backbiting. There is a subtle jibe in her words at Ram and Laxman who exercise their sharp tongues to bad-mouth her, instead of following their Rajput dharma and using their weapons for the good of society. Further, there is a hint of a taunt at their manhood for picking on her instead of pursuing acts of valour. Ram is provoked enough at his wife's jeer to sharply warn Sita to hold her tongue or he would have her immured alive in a wall (Vyathit 19).

Yet another local element is added to the character of Ram in the Chamba Ramain, in which Ram is shown as a believer in omens. He is so upset when a crow croaks from a withered tree just as he and Laxman set out to look for Sita that he almost faints with anxiety. Ram is also depicted as a simple village man who tries to avoid trouble, if possible, by taking pre-emptive action, but who ultimately concedes the omnipotence of destiny. According to the Lahauli Ram Katha, during the period of exile Ram makes his palace in 'antarikshapuri' to avoid the maleficent effects of the naga in 'nagalok,' of the sun and the moon in 'aakashlok,' and of kaalpurush in 'manushyalok' (Loppa 12). Nevertheless, Marich does arrive there and Ram must pick up his bow and quiver to follow his destiny. Thus, these scenes of domesticity and interstices in familial relationships, together with contextualizing the characters in the hill customs and milieu, make Ram and his people of the Pahari Ramains easily accessible and identifiable to the masses.

In an interesting Ram Katha of Nirmand, Ram is said to have divorced his wife in a previous birth. This places Ram squarely in the midst of the life of common people. It is a reflection of the easily opened bonds of marriage in the area, at one time. Divorce was not seen as failure of or blot on a person; rather, it was taken as a matter-of-fact aspect of life, albeit painful and causing bitterness. The folk narrative depicts the wife from the earlier birth as a jackal who laughs loudly in the jungle while Ram and his brothers sit mourning the death of their father. All other creatures are quiet and the lion questions her strange behaviour. She asks to be taken to the princes of Ayodhya and mocks them as ill-omened offspring. Ram comes out to kill the impertinent jackal and as he picks up his bow, the mourning period is deemed to be over. Laxman follows his brother who has been stopped in his tracks by the jackal who derides him by pointing out that if he killed her he would forever be known as the slayer of a she-jackal. When Laxman steps forward to silence the beast, Ram stops him. He tells Laxman that she was his wife in an earlier birth in which he had divorced her and she had only come to get back at him in the form of the jackal (Sharma, Deepak 110-111).

In addition to placing Ram in the zeitgeist of the remote areas of Himachal, this katha also brings out the intimate interaction of the hill people with nature. In an analogous story, grief-stricken at the death of Dashrath, Ram falls in a faint for a number of days. Perpetual night falls over the world and there is danger of Creation being annihilated. A jackal then comes to the brothers and scoffs at their weakness that allows Ravan to carry away Sita. Ram is jolted out of his stupor and he steps out in anger to slay the animal. As soon as he does so dawn breaks and mourning ends (Sharma, Yograj 100). This is an adequate indicator of the closeness of the hill people to nature and there are many occasions when this proximity and affinity are highlighted: According to the Lahauli Ram Katha, when Ram struggles to skin the golden deer with his knife as the hide draws close together again. After much struggle he is guided by a crow who advises him to insert small wooden pieces in the hide as he cuts it to keep the two ends from meeting (Loppa 11). In the Ram Kathas of Kinnaur and of Kullu the monkey king sits crying in the way of Ram and Laxman as they are about to set out in search of Sita. Ram is vexed at this inauspicious omen and wants to kill the simian, but, Laxman stops him from doing so. The monkey king tells Ram that the langur king had run away with his wife and if Ram would help him get her back, he would return the favour by helping him to get back his wife (Negi 128; Thakur, Vidya 129). According to the folk Ramains of Kullu and Mandi as also the Ram Katha of Hamirpur, Ram asks all the flora and fauna for clues to find Sita. If they were helpful and concerned he blessed them, if not, he cursed them. Thus, the druba grass, who tried to thwart Ravan's return to Lanka with Sita, is given auspicious status and is used to purify, sanctify and perform puja. On the other hand, the chil-pine tree is condemned to burn with the resin within it (Ram, Atma 35; Thakur, Molu 88-9). In Kinnaur, the Ram Katha narrates a humorous story about how Hanuman offered to lay his tail over the ocean as a bridge for Ram's army. Familiar with the caprice of monkeys, Ram tests Hanuman's steadiness by throwing an apple into the water. Hanuman immediately leaps after it. Then Ram explains the importance of self-control to him and points out that had he done this while the soldiers were crossing the sea on his tail, they would have all drowned. Hanuman then meekly stretches his tail as an immovable bridge and stays still until the last warrior has crossed over (Loppa 14).

The Ramain in the Hamskad dialect of Kinnaur makes Bharat the eldest son of Dashrath (Negi 17; Sharma, Banshiram 159-161). In a society where polyandry was common till very recent times, this supposition makes

Bharat the heir to his father's kingdom and the first husband to the common wife the brothers would take in marriage. In such a situation, the younger brothers were often deprived of their due even if they were more deserving than the eldest brother. However, Dashrath is said to believe that Ram is more deserving of the throne and nominates him his heir. This happening is exploited by the evil Phapha Kuttan, handmaiden to Kaikeyi, who then insists that Kaikeyi's son, Bharat, ought to get his right of primogeniture even if it entails the exile of Ram. Thus, in this episode of the folk *Ramayan*, Ram's exceptional qualities are accentuated to draw attention to the underlying tensions within the social institution of polyandry. The rights and obligations of the eldest son and the desire of the younger brother(s) to be independent and carve out an individual identity are tellingly brought out in this rendering.

Folk literature provides a grounded and spontaneous alternative discourse to the idealized canonical literature and this is clearly visible in the Pahari Ramains and Ram Kathas. To illustrate this aspect in the corpus of Ram-related folk literature, it is worth noting that Ravan and Kaikeyi are not shown as evil incarnate in it. In the Una Ramain, for instance, Ram is the agency in his exile and not the receiver of a parental diktat or a victim of a step-mother's designs. The narrative recounts how Ram does not return till late evening from play one day. Kaikeyi goes in search of him and finds him sitting on the riverbank. Ram asks Kaikeyi for a boon and then demands that she have him exiled so that he could fulfil the work he had come to accomplish in this world (Satyavati 42). In another episode of the same Ramain, Ram invites his foe, Ravan to perform puja for the consecration of the Shivalinga at Rameshwaram. This Ram does as an acknowledgement of Ravan's great learning and underscores the fact that reverence for the erudite runs deep in the psyche of the people in Himachal Pradesh, the chosen place for the pursuit of tapas by Rishis in early times. It is said that after Ravan finished the rites, Ram and Laxman bowed to the Brahmin for his blessings. It is then that Ravan bestowed upon them the boon of victory in the impending war (Shant 36-7).

It can, then, be concluded from the above that the character of Ram in the Pahari Ramains of Himachal performs both important functions of a folk hero: first, he reflects the rooted attitudes, beliefs, customs and value system of a people as a result of which his character holds out much affinity to the common folk. Second, he puts forward certain ideals and exemplary behaviour for his people to emulate. While the latter leads toward reverence, the former facilitates identification; and together, they place Ram in the paradigm of the folk hero in the literature and minds of Himachal Pradesh. It is, thus, imperative that the fast disappearing

oral literature related to Ram be kept alive. Although, efforts to preserve and crystallize Pahari Ramains in a particular period is a necessary and important ongoing step, yet, the absence of the pulse of the times, the life rhythms of the people of Himachal, and the fluidity and multiplicity of oral versions, would lead to it becoming an atrophied and fossilized artefact of the past rather than being the joyous and tumultuous flow of lived life and alive expressions.

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The Home and The World by Rabindranath Tagore, tr. by Nivedita Sen, Srishti Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 2004.

The first question that comes to mind when one picks up a second rendering of Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* from Bangla to English is — After Surendranath Tagore's translation of the novel[1] ,was a second one really necessary? After all, it is Surendranath's translation that is being used both within and outside the academia and a sizeable section of the non-Bangla readership may have been acquainted with the writings of the Nobel laureate through it alone! Apart from the popularity of the novel and the scholarly attention it has received making it find its way into the undergraduate/postgraduate English literature curriculum in several universities both in India and abroad and the cinematographic transcreation[2] of the same (in Bangla) by Satyajit Ray, perhaps it is the right time to renew the novel by a fresh translation of it in contemporary English and it is this fact alone that motivates one to pick it up and see whether it makes any difference after all.

The first thing that strikes a reader who picks up the second translation is the colloquial quality of the 'Bangla-English' that is purposefully used. In a globalized world where the ethics of multiculturalism has become a dominant marker, hyphenated identities are no longer restricted to transnational movements of people. It has become a common phenomenon within national boundaries too as regional identity stakes come to the forefront celebrating the very diversity of India as a post-colonial nation. Hence, Sen's opening lines—

> O dear Ma, I remember the vermilion in the parting of your hair, your wide, red-bordered sari, and your deep, gentle, tranquil eyes, all spread like the crimson rays of the dawn across my heart. (1)

where the Bangla terms 'Ma' and 'sari' are simply retained without any explanation at all. It immediately takes the reader to the socio-cultural context in which the source language (SL) text is embedded. Compare this to Surendranath Tagore's opening lines of the novel –

'MOTHER, today there comes back to mind the vermilion mark at the parting of your hair, the *sari* which you used to wear, with its wide red border, and those wonderful eyes of yours, full of depth and peace.' (17)

with footnotes to the words 'vermilion mark' and 'sari'. This clearly demonstrates the considerations that the translator had in mind regarding the target readership. While the first translation was primarily catering to the cultural needs of a Euro-American community, the second one is geared towards serving the literary/aesthetic needs of the non-Bangla speaking readership both within and outside India but on terms that are governed by the cultural nuances of the SL and not the target language (TL). Several such instances can be culled out by comparing the two translations. Consider the next example: while Sen introduces the central metaphor of 'ghare-baire' (the inside-outside axis of home) in the following manner,

'My husband was very keen that I should be able to step outside the andarmahal. One day I asked him, "Why do I need the outside world?"
"The world may need you," he replied.' (15)

In the 1919 translation, it is rendered as -

'My husband was very eager to take me out of *purdah*. One day I said to him: 'What do I want with the outside world?'

'The world may want you,' he replied. (23)

While Tagore himself used the following word structure to convey the same:

Amar swamir boro iccha chhilo amake baire ber korben. Ekdin ami take bollum, bairete amar dorkar ki?
Tini bollen, tomake bairer dorkar thakte pare. (478)

If one takes a cursory glance, the term 'purdah' seems to be an unwarranted inclusion to satisfy the common perceptions/misperceptions of European ideas about India in particular and the Orient in general. Again the term 'want' in place of 'need' is an unconscious slip on the part of Surendranath Tagore as he seems to portray only one dominant trait of Bimala's character ignoring the complexity of the SL text and thereby structures her representation in sexual terms alone highlighting the features of her desire. Tagore's conceptualization of the character emerges from the preëmption

of conflict that he envisages would follow from the *clash of civilizations* as Nikhilesh (Bimala's husband) is interested in 'enlightening' his 'traditional' wife through the European model of education. In the context of the novel it is Nikhilesh's experiment with his wife's 'education' that leads to the tragedy ending in his death and a psychologically distraught Bimala who realizes the price she had to pay to fulfill the same. By making Nikhilesh, Bimala and Sandip tell their individual stories in a biographical mode, the author tries to impress upon the reader that the brunt of what happened as a result had to be a shared responsibility of sorts. Empty moralizing or creating cardboard characters with certain slogans to demonstrate ideas was in no way the objective of Tagore. He rather used his critical consciousness to carve out psychologically intense characters who demonstrate through the working out of an internal logic that governed their being the problematic at hand. The extract cited above thereby demonstrates that Sen has been more faithful and stylistically closer to the SL text than Surendranath Tagore who is seldom seen to move out of the thralldom of colonial servitude even while translating an author who had ideas that were celebrated because of their fiercely independent status. Tagore is regarded as a leading figure of Bengali renaissance that had within it the wisdom of the best in the East and the West as in its oppositional frame-work, it carried the vision of a critical alternative that championed a universal humanism whose lineages were definitely not one-dimensional in nature.

Another remarkable feature of Sen's translation is the incorporation of several non-italicized Bangla words and phrases into the English text like 'raja' (2), 'badshah' (2), 'aanchal' (9), 'Chotorani' (12), 'Mejorani' (301), 'Didi' (261), 'Thakurpo' (292), 'Swadeshi' (23), 'Sandipbabu' (42)[3], 'Bande Mataram' (42),'andarmahal' (46), 'pithe' (292), etc. without any footnote as blocks disturbing the visual symmetry of the text. This in turn indicates the self-confidence of contemporary translators who unlike the first generation Indian writers of English, hardly attempt to work on terms dictated by the needs of the TL readership. The conscious attempt here is undoubtedly to convey through the Bangla-ized English a socio-literary context that is both a foreign as well as an integral part of the cultural environment of the SL owing to the history of colonization. The well-researched glossary (317-320) at the end of the text merely informs the reader about myths and legends of gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon that Tagore had used to weave in a symbolic matrix pertinent to the semiological overtones of the text as well as the meanings of some common Bangla words like 'batasha', 'Chandramallika', 'Magh',

'Shojne', etc. that had been retained in the translation. Interestingly the term '*Sajna*' (202) in the first translation is spelt as 'shojne', 'Moguls and Pathans' (18) as 'Moghuls and Pathaans' (4), etc. following the phonetic structure of the SL that captures the colloquial Bangla. The minimal use of footnotes by Sen in the main text unlike the first translation, except to convey historical and literary references or comparative ones referring to Surendranath's translation and explaining the choice of particular usage of words like the Urdu 'zenana' (20) in place of 'andarmahal' (14) for the term 'antahpur' in the SL text helps in unhindered reading. Again the 'Translator's Note' (312-316) discusses the departures, the omissions and commissions that the first translator makes and the liberty with which huge chunks of the SL text are simply deleted as they were either too difficult to translate or regarded as superfluous for the TL readership. These are in my opinion the major strengths of the second translation which is free from the colonial hangovers of the first. One however wonders why a conscious translator like Sen chooses to retain the title of Surendranath's translation *The Home and the World* despite her objection to it as mentioned in the detailed explanation of the same in the 'Introduction' (x-xi) and not leave it just as *Ghare-Baire* following the internal logic of the translated text that has fearlessly accented the English in a particular way.

The translator's attempt to capture the natural cadence and linguistic rhythm of the SL text and the complete nonchalance demonstrated by her regarding the 'difficulties' that a non-Bangla or a non-Indian reader may face in trying to catch the cultural nuances of the TL text is yet another commendable feature of the second translation. One is strongly reminded of African writings in English where authors like Achebe, Ngugi, Amcheta, Ezwenzi, Armah, among several others had tried to politicize the usage of English as a language by consciously Africanizing it. The manner in which the Igbo world is presented in *Things Fall Apart* or the nature of urban Nigeria in *Jagua Nana* imbues the English language with an African spirit. Sen's translation definitely reflects the direction in which we are all headed as surely the 21st century would usher in not only the sure demise of Queen's English but would also pave the way for the birth of a legion where one would be forced to speak a single language with a multi-forked tongue.

Anuradha Ghosh

Notes

1. First published in Great Britain by Macmillan in 1919 and later by Penguin Books Ltd. in 1985. It was first published in India by Penguin Books India as late as 1999.
2. The film *Ghare Baire* was made in 1984. (The cover design of the book is based on a shot from the film).
3. Instead of 'Sandip Babu' (27) as in the first translation, the term 'Babu' retains the pejorative connotation for the white English readership as it was a term that was used for clerks, quite opposed to the semantic nuances of the same in Bangla where the term acts like a suffix and is a marker of respect used in Sen's text.

Ram Nabami Natak, by Gumanhiram Barua, tr. by Tilottoma Misra, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2007, Pp xxxvii+72, Rs.295/-

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Ram Nabami Natak, the first modern Assamese play (written in 1857, published in book form in 1870) has been translated into English with a very exhaustive Introduction, obviously essential for a book like this which, in spite of not being one of huge literary merit, is of great significance in the history of the concerned society and its literature. It was the first play in Assamese with a tragic ending. The Introduction makes interesting reading, as, instead of treading a hackneyed, uncritical route, it convincingly delineates the situation the miniscule Assamese middle-class found itself in, in the nineteenth century. And it was a confusing situation. The feudal monarchy of the Ahoms was replaced by the crude bureaucracy of the (East India) Company; Bengali was introduced as the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam; American Christian Missionaries arrived at Sivasagar (where the Ahoms had their Capital for most part of their six-century rule) with a printing press and published the first Assamese journal *Orunodoi* (1846) with the purpose of propagating Christianity in the region.

But while the translator brings forth a fairly detailed picture of the nineteenth century Assam, some of her interpretations on various aspects are not incontrovertible. As it is not within the scope of this review to take up each and every point of the more than seventy page Introduction, I intend to limit my reaction to those observations only which are directly related to *Ram Nabami* in particular and Assamese literary scene of the period in general.

First, the translator shows *Jonaki* (the first genuine Assamese literary journal published from Calcutta from 1889) and the triumvirate behind this—namely Lakshminath Bezbarua, Hemchandra Goswami and Chandrakumar Agarwalla—as consciously upholding the monotheism of Sankaradeva in defence against the rapidly expanding influence of Christianity in the region. Such an observation overlooks many realities obtaining at the time. 'West' should have been the word in place of 'Christianity'. This west had English as its language, technology as its instrument and Christianity as its religion. The educated minds in Assam saw the future of the devastated society in the healthy symbiosis of their indigenous treasures and the western enlightenment.

Those young minds of the time took it upon themselves to bring before the modern world the gems of Assamese literary, cultural and spiritual tradition and thus they sang the glow and glory of the Sankara era. Smt. Misra appreciates Gunabhiram's "dispassionate evaluation" of the works of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. But it is difficult to agree with her when she says, "This trend....was however soon replaced by the passionate nationalism of the *Jonaki* writers of the last decades of the nineteenth century, who emphasized the uniqueness of the Assamese Vaishnava poets rather than seeing them as a part of the Bhakti tradition." The lectures delivered by Lakshminath Bezbarua in the royal court of Baroda in 1934 can be referred to as a gem of testimony of his erudition on the Bhakti movement and Sankaradeva's role in it. I quote just one sentence—

> In today's article...I will come straight to Bhakti Marga or the path of devotion and love, the subject matter of my discourse. The great Ramanuja Acharya, and after him a host of followers of his school and others, including Sri Sankaradeva of Assam and Sri Chaitanyadeva of Bengal...expounded the philosophy and merit of this path, and propounded the cult throughout the length and breadth of India.
> (pages 60-61-*Religion of Love And Devotion* by Lakshminath Bezbarua, edited by Maheswar Neog, published by Asam Sahitya Sabha).

The translator appropriately points out Gunabhiram's concern for women's emancipation and that at times he 'argues like a modern Marxist.' However, literary contributions of the *Jonaki* writers have not been recorded as adequately. They established Sankaradeva in the modern context, which, apart from making an assertion of the merit of indigenous tradition, encouraged an egalitarian social climate. And they introduced in Assamese

literature genres like short stories, poems including sonnets, social satires and of course novels and plays. This confluence of Namghar (Vaishnava prayer hall and village assembly) of Assam, 'tea party' of Calcutta (Bezbarua mentions about it in his autobiography) and coffee-house of London facilitated the blossoming of the intellectual life of the Assamese middle-class. And if there was an exercise of 'resistance towards the Brahmo Dharma as an alien Faith from Bengal', it should be judged against the backdrop of the geo-political realities of the time, as Gunabhiram himself writes in the preface of *Ram Nabami*—'homeland' and 'foreign land' for Assam and Bengal respectively. Instead of acknowledging this historic role of *Jonaki*, she criticizes the '*Jonaki* group' for their 'strong reservation on the issue of women's emancipation'. She is particularly harsh on Lakshminath who in his autobiography mentions very little about the mother

> except the casually thrown in comment that she gave birth to her son in a sand bank on the Brahmaputra.... The travails of a childbirth under such hazardous circumstances do not seem to merit any sympathetic comment in the memoirs of her illustrious son.

Let us not blame 'Sahityarathi'(as Bezbarua is referred to in the Assamese literature.) for not weeping over his mother's labour pain. In the same autobiography he appreciatively mentions about Gunabhiram's daughter Swarnalata studying in Bethun school, "It was something new for an Assamese girl." He also respectfully mentions about Gunabhiram's wife Bishnupriya writing a book(*Nitikatha*) on moral issues, "It is noteworthy that an Assamese lady wrote such lucid prose some thirty five years ago." In the book he profusely laments his eldest daughter Surabhi's death at five years of age. Then there is the reference to his wife acting in a play staged in Calcutta.

Smt. Misra uses the words 'Ankia Nat' and 'Bhaona' almost synonymously. There is a clear difference between the two. Ankia Nat denotes the six plays by Sankaradeva where the language is Brajawali—which was an artificial literary language mixing Maithili and Assamese—and glorification of Lord Krishna is their all-pervading theme. But 'Bhaona', without the prefix 'Ankia', denotes those plays written by numerous playwrights in Eastern Assam region from the nineteenth century onwards. These are in Assamese and Krishna Bhakti is not always the theme.

The translator's remark—"The *Orunodoi* also helped in establishing a new secular trend in Assamese literature..." may appear confusing to readers particularly because of the use and abuse of the word 'secular' today. I quote Dr Satyendranath Sharma in this context, "...The mire

and the muck of Assamese socio-religious life, their superstitions and so many other such problems do not find any reflection in the writings of these missionaries or in *Orunodoi*....Their purpose was not to awaken the patriotic feelings in the minds of the Assamese or to reform the society without taking recourse to Christianity." (*Asamiya Sahityar Samikhyatmak Itibritta*) Dr. Sharma further said that the constructive appeals of the likes of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan are not the 'chorus of *Orunodoi* literature,' but 'solo tunes only.' Readers are distracted from this fact by the word 'secular' (it is also used in some other places) which did not exist in the cerebration of the period analysed.

Regarding the translation of the play, the translator notes at the threshold the challenges involved in the task. She is very right in observing the region-wise and social stratum-wise difference of Assamese at the time.(Such differences are discernible even today.) It is also to be noted that Assamese writers in the mid to late nineteenth century could not dissociate their literary pursuit from their endeavour and responsibility of defining a modern Assamese prose for formal public discourse and library purpose. Their problem was compounded by the fact that the initially only available public forum — *Orunodoi* — was owned by American Baptist missionaries who had not arrived there primarily to devise a code for modern Assamese orthography and syntax. In the preface it has been analysed how the journal initially discouraged the use of Sanskrit-based literary Assamese, a stand they had to withdraw and agree to the style and spellings approved by the 'Assamese learned men.' *Ram Nabami* was written in this period of conflicting initiatives.

In view of all these factors, readers would appreciate her intention to 'give the translation a flavour of the source text.' Retaining some of the vulgarized construction is also understood. But literal translation of some proverbs like 'ripen a banana in instant with a strong blow of my fist' or 'the wind opens the door and bachelor gets the blame' is laughable. Again to put brother/sister- in- law for various kinship terms is too flat, as in Assamese, like any other Indian language, there are more than half a dozen variants for each. At times it gets ludicrously different from the original. When Nabami learnt that Ram was Jayanti's cousin, she requested the former to make her 'zaa'—which in Assamese means husband's brother's wife. But it has been translated as 'do what you can'(Act ii, scene v). Things get horrible in Act v, scene ii. The words 'dom' and 'dumuni', though used in the original, should not have been retained as these are supposed to be derogatory now-a-days. The translator made it further messy by using 'fisher-woman' for 'dumuni' on one occasion. Again 'koni' in original means 'egg'. Translator made it opium ('kani').

These are only some of the examples that betray the translator's inadequate homework and poor understanding of the source text. The reader is left with a feeling that the translator's interest in the background of the book has not been matched by her care for the play itself. On the whole one is not encouraged to conclude that the translation has succeeded to a reasonable extent in presenting a historic work from the formative period of modern Assamese literature to the international readership.

Amritjyoti Mahanta

Snake Catcher by Naiyer Masud, tr. by M U Memon, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2006. Pp.xiii+243. Rs.250

When Naiyer Masud appeared on the Urdu literary scene with his first collection of short stories, *Simiya* in 1984 it was nothing less than an event. Readers and critics had to sit up and take notice. The stories were entirely different from what the Urdu readers have experienced earlier. They were neither like the realist story of the thirties and the forties, nor like the symbolic/abstract story of the seventies of the twentieth century. The language, the atmosphere and even the characters appeared markedly different from the mainstream Urdu fiction. There is no beginning, middle or end in the traditional sense of the terms. There is very little action. The melancholy, brooding ambience that pervaded the stories made critics accuse him of morbidity, a charge the author confronted squarely by asserting that if a character's life is morbid it should be depicted as such, without inserting cheerfulness into it. After *Simiya* Masud produced two other collections—*Itr-e Kafoor* (1990) and *Taus Chaman ka Maina* (1997)—scaling new heights in his fictional art and inviting comparisons with Kafka, Poe and Dostoevsky. By his own admission, he is a self-conscious writer, painstakingly working his language, and ruthlessly excising a greater part of his drafts to arrive at the final version, which inevitably, gestures towards a wider universe than that articulated in the canvas of particular stories.

Snake Catcher contains eleven stories selected from the three collections mentioned above representing different facets of Masud's art as a storyteller. The volume opens with a compelling, coming of age story of the adolescent

narrator who encounters domains of fear and desire in all the houses he inhabits from time to time and the women that come to his life, and finally, his voluntary decision to give up speech. The story also demonstrates Masud's fascination for houses—abandoned, dilapidated, run down—with mysterious niches and dark corners.

> I returned to the houses I had seen many times and located these domains of fear and desire. No house, whether old or new, nor one among many of the same basic design, was without these domains. Looking for these domains of fear and desire became a vocation with me...(p 13)

"Ganjefa" is about the tenuous relationship of a mother with her worthless son, a dependent, who lived off the earnings of his mother till she died, and the mother's dream about her son. It is also as much about Ladlay, an eccentric but loveable hawker of medicinal wares who sold his Badshahi *manjan*, famed to have magical powers, in the Sunday market at Nakhkhas where a large crowd is irresistibly drawn to him as he holds forth on the potency and efficacy of an impressive array of herbs. "Resting Place" is about an itinerant medicine man who knew the healing power of herbs. After a lot of wanderings this healer finds a resting place in the house of his host who has an unkempt garden that contains several precious herbs which the healer uses to cure patients. However, what stays with the reader after having read the story is the curious relationship between the host and the guest which Masud builds up with incredible lightness of touch. This story also illustrates Masud's careful use of space which can be found in quite a few other stories. This space is often constricted and claustrophobic. "... And the ceiling of my resting place feels as though it's right on top of my chest." In "Weather Vane" the story revolves around a dysfunctional weather vane, apparently a useless object but Masud's uncanny imagination makes it the primary pivot around which revolves the quotidian of a family. Its presence in the story is so powerful that it assumes the dimension of a character.

Masud's characters are quaint figures—eccentric, anaemic, introvert, yet loveable. They are not consumed by the daily grind of 'getting and spending' but live a life of their own. Often there is a faint social context, but it is never adequate to explain the way they are and their ruling obsessions. They are not familiar figures that you might encounter on the street yet they do not seem to be entirely improbable. Though somewhat remote from the daily experiences they are not beyond the pale of normality. "Custody" is about the Nauroz family. For several generations 'these people

had some genetically inherited condition which cause every Nauroz to eventually lose his mind.' The story deals with one member of this family. The first person narrator describes how he slowly goes out of his mind, how his shop also begins to look crazy, how he disappears leaving behind two female babies, how the narrator is drawn to them and rears them up, how the 'mad' Nauroz appears to the narrator intermittently, and finally, how the question of the custody of the girls is settled. All this is narrated in a characteristically dead pan voice implying that these are the most common occurrences. This story also demonstrates Masud's penchant for mixing reality and fantasy, what one may fashionably call 'magic realism.'

Masud's forte in building up the atmospherics with consummate skill can be seen in the title story which is about a professional snake catcher, a Shaman-like figure. The young narrator who was bitten by a snake and saved from death by the snake catcher, inadvertently, becomes his assistant, and notices with wonder and awe how the snake catcher is summoned by people, in their hour of distress and the procedure that allows him to draw out poison from human bodies saving many lives. However, with the passage of time, the power of the snake catcher wanes and finally, one day the narrator finds his corpse lying amidst the bodies of many snakes with crushed hoods. The snake catcher's role and social function allows the reader to guess the cultural context and the tenor of life lived by communities of people only dimly hinted by the narrator. About the atmosphere that characterises his stories, this is what Masud has to say:

> ...this peculiar 'atmosphere' may have resulted also from the fact that my own thoughts are never entirely clear to me. The vagueness with which they occur to me imparts, inevitably, a diffuse, dream-like quality to the words I marshal to convey those thoughts. This would explain why the atmosphere appears unfamiliar. I won't deny that sometimes the stories give the impression of being from another time and place. Nevertheless they are drawn from this very life.[1]

The English translation of the stories is consistently good and readable. But that is only to be expected. Muhammad Umar Memon is known to be a translator of great distinction. He has been instrumental in introducing the best of Urdu writers in the West. If Intizar Husain

1. Asif Fanukhi. "A Conversation with Naiyer Masud" AUS, 12, p. 267

and Naiyer Masud have acquired new constituencies of global readership in English and are now regarded as significant writers of the Indian subcontinent the credit largely goes to Memon. Till a few years ago, Masud was known only to a limited circle of Urduwallahs. Now he is known globally, thanks to Memon's pioneering translations. The current volume has endorsements from writers of the stature of Agha Shahid Ali and Amit Chaudhuri. It can be safely speculated that Masud's works will enjoy an 'afterlife' in English translation, more magnificent in many ways, than their life in the original. We must also find a way to accord recognition and reward to such translators who often, single-handedly, do much more to promote our literature, language and culture beyond their native habitats than many institutions, with generous funding, do.

M. Asaduddin

Seeking the Beloved by Shah Abdul Latif, tr. by Anju Makhija and Hari Dilgir, New Delhi, Katha 2005, Pp. 285. Rs.295

One of the books that has been on my shelf for sometime and which I pick up, read, get lost in it, float in its high rhythms and then put in down again is *Seeking the Beloved*, the English translation of the Sindhi original *Shah Jo Risalo.* Anju Makhija and Hari Dilgir, each known for perfectionist qualities in their own field, have collaboratively translated the verses, providing the reader with a fine selection. So much so that it holds one and draws one into its mystic poetry of desire, search and belonging.

One is compelled to ask the question—what is it that holds the mind and imagination of the reader? And others that follow in quick succession are related to its relevance to our times, the need for an English translation and the significance of this particular one. The search for answers takes one to several areas: history, religion, emotion, music and the very nature of love itself.

The verses reflect on the nature of human existence, its meaning and its continued search for the all-enveloping presence. I am not particularly of a religious mind, yet Sufism and the Bhakti movement have always found a ready response in me. As Motilal Jotwani, himself a renowned Sindhi scholar, has observed in his comprehensive introduction, Sufism

is for all times, and Shah Abdul Latif for all humanity. It is amazing to see the intricate knowledge that the sufi and bhakti poets had of music. *Shah Jo Risalo* is believed to have used thirty *surs*. Romantic imagery, with the devotee adopting a female voice, is in abundance. Devotion and surrender are synonyms; separation is pain but suffering is the self-cleansing necessary for the final union. As is evident, the code that rejects fixity, ritual and pleasure, goes on to define freedom and liberation anew.

Motilal Jotwani points out the affiliation with Vedantic thought. But to my mind, it is even necessary to enter into that, for the poetry creates its own world. The absence of a religious dogma helps them find God in every nook and corner, to go ahead and strike a friendly, complaining, bargaining and nudging relationship with him and to wrap him within one's own self. The individual devotee, moving simultaneously both inwards and outwards, is caught in a conscious dialogue, resulting in a rejection of the outer world. These are the processes that prepare him for the merger with the beloved.

It is difficult to confine Sufism to a single concept. Saints and poets have constantly widened its area. Shah Abdul Latif, himself a seventeenth century poet (1689-1752) invested his poetry with emotional appeal. He turned to many a folk tale. In this selection we have some; of these *Sasui-Punhoon* is one and *Leela-Chanesar*, a variation of the love-sacrifice theme, is another. The latter is a story of married love, its failure in the face of material beauty, subsequent separation and suffering and a final union. There are also others like *Moomal-Rano* which treats of same sex love, *Sohini and Mehar* (popularly also known as *Sohini-Mahiwal*), a story of tragic love. There is another one of *Umar Marui* where the rejected lover uses a rich suitor to avenge his own rejection.

The wide range of love relationships that often end in tragedy, shake free of the normative patterns and go on to project death as a union or a merger with the beloved thus denying the finality of death. But, at the same time, some traditional value structures do find a reflection, such as chastity. The translators have very wisely provided brief summaries of the folk tales used and it would be rewarding to work out the gender relationships in non-Sufi terms, locating them in socio-psychological interpretation. Alternative role models, social relationships that question social structures, women with a will of their own are familiar features of Sufi thought and Makhija's inspirational moment at the Kutch conference, which launched the process of this translation, has brought this to our attention.

A word about the translation. True, the Urdu-Hindi knowing reader

can discern the original words/proverbs in their English equivalent, but that perhaps is a virtue. When the word 'friend' occurs, swiftly our mind shifts to 'yaar', or we recollect that a lover with his head in his hands is actually carrying his '*jaan hatheli par*'. The crescendo, the rise and fall of the rhythms has been finely transferred. Let me quote a few verses as evidence of this as well as the range of emotion.

He is
that
this

life
death

friend
enemy

breath of breath
is he

(p 33)

and

if you want love
go to the tavern

cut the head
place it in the barrel
drink brave one
drown in the draught

this lethal drink is cheap
in exchange for the head

(p.37)

Pain and suffering are an inevitable prelude to union; the beloved "stabs me/ with his knife." The greed of love is forgiveable: "when he invites you/for a drink / gulp like a camel / none can enter / uninvited (p63). The poet advises contrariness: hold a steady inward gaze / swim contrary to the world's ways / choose to go upstream/while others float downstream (p.112). There is sense in "moving towards the void" (115), for that alone is all. The landscape of Sindh, camels, crows, swans— all find their way into *Shah Jo Risalo* as the worldly and other-worldly are juxtaposed.

Makhija and Dilgir deserve congratulations for an additional reason and that is a love for Sindhi language, culture and history, for languages alone keep people alive and together. Katha's volumes are high in production

values, this one is no exception. Geeta Dharmarajan has designed a very appropriate cover. If the past is of importance to us, the past we need is one that shows us how to connect. Shah Abdul Latif's verses do just that, and translations connect languages, cultures and temporal spaces.

Jasbir Jain

Vijay Tendulkar's Plays, An Anthology of Recent Criticism, ed. by V.M. Madge, Pencraft International, Delhi, 2007, Pp.184, Rs.380

> Umakant (picking up the tin-opener from the side-table). Let go of me, Manik! Let go! (She is only pretending to hold him back) I'll knock the bastard's block off! I'll crack him open like a cockroach! Let go of me! Let me go! I'll kill the pimp! Let go! Ramakant. Fine one you are to come and kill me! I'll bash your bloody brains out! Filthy bloody bastard! Let him go, Manik. Let go of him!

The uninitiated may imagine this to be a street brawl of ruffians or gangsters, resorting to unbridled expletives in lewd and filthy language, unable to settle an issue and ready to fight it out. But no. This is a dialogue between two brothers in the presence of their sister in their house. Ramakant is the elder and Umakant the younger sibling while Manik is the sister in Vijay Tendulkar's explosive play, *The Vultures* ('Gidhade'). It is a ruthless commentary on human conduct, verging on the inhuman, with its obnoxious tendencies to violence, avarice and sex. It goes morbid in the portrayal of its characters and action while highlighting their decadence in a realistic depiction of the middle class milieu caught in a degenerative vortex.

Ramakant and Umakant who have already received their shares of their father's wealth want to extract the maximum from him and even fight each other for money. Manik who has also a vicious role in the covert conspiracy against their father has illicit relations with her paramour, the Raja of Hondur and conceives his child. The two brothers want to blackmail the Raja but are sorely disappointed to know that he has died of heart attack. They kick Manik in frustration and abort her. Manik, in a fit of jealousy, aborts Rama, Ramakant's wife who has conceived

from Rajaninath. The latter is the illegitimate son of Papa Pitale. Rama and Rajaninath are the lone sane elements in the family but ironically they develop illicit relations. Rama wants to attain motherhood but is frustrated by his drunken and reckless husband Ramakant. A victim of the vicious happenings in the family, she feels attracted to Rajaninath, another victim of circumstances.

No wonder, A.P. Dani, in this anthology, has compared *The Vultures* with John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, a Jacobean revenge drama of love, intrigue and violence. Here the trouble arises because the Duchess loves Antonio, the honest steward of the court. Her brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, warn her against marrying him because of their royal blood, though Ferdinand later admits that he was interested in her property. She, however, marries him secretly which the brothers come to know. She is caught, tortured and killed along with two of her children. But destiny pays them back in their own coin. Ferdinand goes mad and Cardinal is killed. Antonio too is killed and his son inherits the dukedom of Malfi. However, the leitmotif here is revenge while most of the characters in *The Vultures* are driven by an avarice which knows no bounds. There are similarities in theme and imagery and propensity to violence and sex.

As V.B.Deshpande points out, Tendulkar in this play wants to bring out the vulture in men, particularly in their interpersonal relationships. Tendulkar does not wish to soft-pedal on this issue and is in no mood to compromise while portraying the characters vis-a-vis the theme boldly in all the brutal detail. But questions are sometimes raised as to how is it that he sees only the vulture in man and not the eagle? The answer could perhaps be that all his characters do not show vulturine tendencies. There are eagles too. Even in real life there could be only a few instances of people being entirely good or unredeemable bad. There are overlapping shades of varying quality which sometimes defy rigid categorization. There are likes of Rama and Rajaninath who are victims of circumstances but they are not rapacious or lethal in their reaction. Moreover, one cannot dictate to a writer something which is in his creative domain, shaped by his own observation and experience and guided by his own perceived object of writing.

This anthology attempts at a critical assessment of all the major plays of the eminent dramatist while focusing on his overriding concerns and creative craft. He has nothing to hide but everything to expose and present the social ills and evils in all their stark reality. But the desire to shock the audience at any cost as a radicalist stance may sometimes prove counter-productive. V.M. Madge cites *Sakharam Binder* as a case in point and clearly brings out the paradoxes inherent in the characterization. Sakharam proudly flaunts his non-conformist outlook while berating the

husbands who almost conventionally exploit their wives in every possible way while depriving them of their basic freedom. He ostensibly, therefore, gives shelter to such hapless wives who have escaped from the clutches of cruelty. But this he does actually to satisfy his own sexual needs and meet his exacting demands. Moreover, the woman in his house has to remain indoors whenever there is a visitor and cannot speak to strangers. If it becomes necessary to speak to them she has to draw a veil over her face! In what way is the obscurantist Sakharam Binder then different from the husbands he criticizes?

It may also be argued, of course, that such inconsistencies cannot be ruled out as implausible, particularly when the aim is to expose the selfish nature of a character who has one set of rules for himself and a different one for the others to follow, all for the sole purpose of serving his own interests at any cost. The hollowness of Sakharam's claims of being a non-conformist is exposed when he expects Laxmi to observe orthodox manners. Morever, he is downcast and his discomfiture is endless when the domineering Champa enters the scene and goes on giving her own commands, thus pushing him at the receiving end in an attempt at role reversal. Though the God-fearing Laxmi has a benign influence on him he prefers the voluptuous Champa to meet his physical demands and ultimately kills her for getting too close to Dawood Miyan and having sexual relations with him.

Neela Bhalla speaks of the dynamics of power manipulation in *Ghashiram Kotwal* where the eponymous character uses his innocent daughter Gauri to secure him the post of Kotwal in his lust for power and goes on committing excesses of cruelty. The predator ultimately becomes the prey and Ghasiram is stoned to death. He is outsmarted by the wily Najia Phadnavis who uses machiavellian tactics to get rid of the Kotwal.

N.S.Dharan has elaborated how the mock-trial in *Silence! The Court is in Session* turns the playful Miss Benare serious and dumbfounded when she is abruptly charged with infanticide under the Indian Penal Code. Jyoti Havnurkar brings out the instances of levity and seriousness in this well-known play. The seemingly inquisitorial nature of the mock-trial is not without its funny side. Apart from the pan-chewing activities in the so-called court, Ms. Benare, though a defendant in the case requests that the charge of infanticide be converted into robbery of public property. The oath is taken not on the Gita, as per the usual practice, but on the Oxford English Dictionary! The short piece on *Kamala* by Vikram Gokhale, Kalindi Deshpande's comments on Vijay Tendulkar's treatment of women characters, Shanta Gokhale's 'Tendulkar on his own terms',

Vijay Tendulkar's conversation with Gowri Ramnarayan and the other contributions are noteworthy. Vikram Gokhale refers to his serious objections to Tendulkar's treatment of characters in *Kamala*.

The objective of this anthology is to present a balanced picture of the oeuvre in a dispassionate assessment. It is a commendable endeavour. The appendices at the end of the text are richly informative. Needless to say, in his innovative treatment of the themes while presenting a modernist vision, Vijay Tendulkar, the doyen of Marathi drama, ranks with Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Badal Sircar in Bengali and Girish Karnad in Kannada literature. Apart from its appeal to a wide spectrum of the pan-Indian readership, this judiciously compiled anthology in English has a well-deserved global reach, facilitating glimpses into the treasure trove of regional writing in India in a proper perspective.

M.N. Chatterjee

Benign Flame: A Saga of Love by B.S.Murthy, Self-imprint, Distributed by Jaico, Hyderabad-27, 2006, Pp.400, Paper Back, Rs 150/-

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An engineer by training and a loss assessor and planner by profession B.S.Murthy published three novels and two books of non-fiction, *Puppets of Faith, Theory of Communal Strife, Bhagavadgita Treatise of Self-help* and *Sundara Kanda:Hanuman's Odyssey. Benign Flame: Saga of Love* is his first novel followed by *Crossing the Mirage* and *Jewel-less Crown Saga of Life*.

Often we find writers, poets and novelists spelling out their credo of creativity in their respective genres. These may be construed as the statements of their conviction and applied to their own ouvre for assessment and understanding. The statement of Murthy's credo revealed to a journalist followed the publication of his long fiction. "For any fiction to impact readers, it must be the soulful tale of a people steeped in their native soil, and not a hotchpotch of characters assembled in makeshift tents laid with cross-cultural pegs." While setting aside the innuendo in the later half of the statement, one can see that the writer is as good as his word going by the first part. The 'major' characters furnish their soulful tale and they are steeped in their soil: the lush Konaseema region of Andhra Pradesh. However this does not appear to be adherence to Nativism as a standpoint of the writer. The avowed intention of the

novelist was to put across the idea that concupiscence could transform itself to the sublime and hence benign becomes the flame of love. *Amor vincit omnia.*

Faithful to the author's credo, the story line winds round the soulful tales of the central characters Roopa, Sandhya, Raja Rao and the inçonsequent Tara. All these are from Hyderabad and Konaseema. Roopa is the daughter of a village postmaster. She has a primarily romantic temperament and to begin with, dreams of becoming a doctor. The love affair of her elder sister, Chandrika, with a man outside her caste, drives Roopa to wedlock in a hurry (lest Chandrika's exogamous marriage should spoil the prospects of her own owing to social taboos) with a small functionary in the government. The not romantic enough young groom tells her on the night of consummation that he cannot help her realize her dream. He debases himself and dies early. Roopa's friend, daughter of a Class I officer, marries Raja Rao, an architect in distant Delhi. The events in the story do not flow like a fortuitous concatenation of events but as manipulations of imagination deliberately to bolster the hypothesis that carnal love eventually leads to purgation and sublimation in the marriage of souls.

Moralistic value judgements apart, a book needs to be judged within the premises of the writer. It is fair to give the novel a patient reading, which includes the acceptance of the premises no matter how far-fetched they are. One man - one woman has been the ideal in sexual relation and the Indic culture is built on this tenet as one of its cornerstones. There are pornographic novels, avowedly, deliberately yellow. But here is a novel, which is a challenge even to complaisant lovers of either sex. *Menage a trois* has always been looked upon as a deviance and not a norm. But permissiveness has come to be the order of this age to the extent of making the whole code of human conduct warranting rewriting in the light of large-hearted permissiveness of human behaviour.

Charting the regions of sexuality without being prurient is no mean task. The unexpurgated version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* received open and loud applause after the proscriptions were successfully lifted. But in this novel more things have to be accepted: lesbianism, and libertine, libidinous wanton orgies. True, earlier, Graham Greene, did make an assertion (through a lovely character Martha in *The Comedians:* " Perhaps the sexual life is the great test, if we survive it with charity to those we love and with affection to those we have betrayed, we needn't worry so much about the good and bad in us." But then the charity we come across in this novel under review becomes a matter of individual understanding and possible acceptance.

Here are the soulful interior monologues and statements of the important characters:

> 'By the way, is the same-sex syndrome abnormal?' She (Roopa) asked herself. 'After all, what's the yardstick to judge it? Why, both of us have (Sandhya and herself) the same intimate want, and suffer when we can't have it. And when we make it, don't we go to the depths of sexual delight and reach the heights of sensual ecstasy? Won't our souls merge with our bodies to communicate our mutual craving in lovemaking? Above all isn't our love our life-force?' (p.83)

> 'Is this fascination for Tara owing to my lesbian leanings?' Roopa began contemplating. 'Oh, I am a bisexual by disposition? No, I can't be. After all, it was only my distress that triggered that union with Sandhya. Looks like Tara is no less enamoured of me. Could she be a lesbian by any chance? If it comes to the shove, it won't be an unwelcome development, would it?' (p.88)

> 'What is the contradiction, if while leading my love life with Raja (Roopa asks hersef), I look after Sathyam's marital needs as well? It seems to be the only sensible way to go about life than feel deprived all my life.' (p.185)

> 'Life in a nutshell is challenging as well as charming,' said Chandrika. 'It's as though the complexities of life are compounded in exogamous marriages. At times, it feels that the risk was worth taking, and on occasion, it seems it's all a bad bargain. There would be depressing moments to go through as well as exciting things to gloat over.' (p.132)

> 'In lesbianism with Roopa, (thought Sandhya) our bodies enthuse our souls, but in coition with Raja, oh, our bodies and should come to fuse.' (p.155)

> 'It's time you know some home truths about us women,' said Tara making Roopa sit in the sofa. 'The radar of male eyes is sure to pick up the unmistakable signals emanating from unhappy women. And in her married life, a woman is either satisfied or dissatisfied, that's all there is to it. Thus, if someone persists with a married woman for some time, it's a sure sign of her own vacillation.' (p.268)

Having quoted to this extent, there is no further need to dwell on the more lurid details of lovemaking particularly lesbian as described on page 79.

Charting the regions of sexuality in individuals who could be typical cases of nymphomania and satyriasis, the author endeavors to scale the peaks of benign understanding. Looking for a portrayal of the human condition in this novel would yield only dissatisfaction to the reader since the author's guns are trained elsewhere.

The problem that bothers the serious reader — this novel does demand a measure of seriousness on the part of the individual intimately personal reader – is one of arriving at his own conclusion. When 'values' undergo total transformation and individualism and fancy rules, new concepts and new ways of living become natural and may even become acceptable. For the very pensive readers it may strike that the novel, for some reason, has not come to the point where mere carnal love is convincingly sublimated as a union of souls, for what matters is Love which per se is not sex-related at all. One needs a saint's eye view to comprehend this kind of 'reality' remembering St Juliana of Norwich:

> Sin is behovely
> All shall be well
> And all manner of things.

V.V.B. Rama Rao

Astride the Wheel by Chandrasekhar Rath, tr. by Jatindra K Nayak, Oxford University Press, Delhi, Rs.245

Astride the Wheel is an exotic novel. The title (original Oriya: *Yantrarudha*) owes to the Hindu Scriptures: an assertion of supremacy of divinity on the functioning of the human machine. Sanatan Dase, the impoverished priest-protagonist of the novel, parrots a line only too often: Can a man do anything on his own? Everything is the doing of providence.

Yet, given a choice, I would go by the human part of it all. I would commend Sanatan Dase, the fifty-year-old temple priest – the householder of a family of eight – for his successful stint with domesticity in the face of poverty; his tenacity to grab an occasional opportunity to earn some money for a month's work away from his wife and children

– so that his debts are repaid respectably. I would empathize with his feeling of impotence as he makes a sacrifice of his patriarchal ego in inviting a reluctant *vaidya* over to treat his ailing wife and son, with a word of recommendation from his 'rival' in the village, as he wouldn't be able to remunerate the greedy physician. I would share his intense melancholy and rejoice in his muted pleasures—would extol his ability to allow his tropical wit to overcome his sense of realities of deprivation. Because I, as a campaigner of autonomy of literature, would not subordinate literature to an ideological agenda.

At the end of the day, however, *Astride...* is a Hindu novel ensconcing the old, Spartan world of Dase, where deprivation and death are incidental contingencies. He cannot grudge his penury as he has been bequeathed priesthood by his forefathers and conditioned to believe in the workings of providence ('Well, this is how God wants it to be'... it is He who provides for everyone and everything', p. 2). For him, householding is both an end and illusion—*maya*. An unshaken faith in the unseen as well as his Hindu spirit helps him cement the porous borders between gratification and denial. He believes in rituals; is willing to lose himself in deliberations on metaphysics; resorts to hymns and songs from scriptures and chanting of gods' names when he is down. He is critical of Nilakantha Mishra, the haughty well-off, ice-head, whom he considers his opponent and yet indulges, though loosely, in the latter's claim to arrogance of the upper caste. The description of the last rites of Dase's wife is detailed. His own death, like his story of shortages, is protracted amid his pilgrimages through the holy shrines of the country. He falls back on his wisdom in the frequent bouts of fancy, where the poignant and the frivolous —the contradictions of life—leak into each other as they do in real life.

As a piece of creative writing, this novel will survive in the grace of its protagonist. For Dase, an exotic world of spiritual freedom lurks somewhere nearby; all the same he never loses track of his immediate society and its dynamics. He rationalizes endlessly that man is powerless before fate and hence the rich and the poor are but the same mortal; yet he finds it hard to come to terms with the death of his wife and son. He has an opinion on everything, and the reader is treated to slices of realism of an Orissan village: evening recitals of scriptures, petty squabbles among communities, rivalry of one-upmanship, caste prejudice, election campaign, peasant cunningness, corruption, healthcare...He laments occasionally on human frailties. He detests Brunda Nahak, the lower class tax collector who calculates his way to be among the political people and lures the villagers to vote for the political party of his interest. Dase believes that sex is for giving birth to progeny, procreation the rule of

the world, and squarely rubbishes the government's steps for birth control. The author even carves out a scope for amusement in the delineation of his protagonist ('Tell me how can you control birth? Again just because people want to live in comfort and eat well, should no one else be allowed to take birth?' p. 65) and raises him beyond the mundane. The realism in the text is commonplace, yet it stands on its own, possibly because of the proximity of the novelist to the world he describes. The anecdotes, in their obliqueness, are credible: the good old world where news would not reach places for a month though you could get a towel for five rupees—in sparse sketches these real worlds of the here-and-now blend into the esoteric ambience of the narration.

The elevation of the protagonist to the poetic height takes place even without the novel's explicitly profound end. This part stretches through four chapters where the protagonist transcends his material link decisively and moves to the realm of the sublime and mystique to embrace death. Because there is dependability about the evolution of the character. His countless ruminations on fate and soul and fulfillment and denial can, in a sense, masquerade as his robust optimism. His apparently abrupt change of heart to renounce the world following the death of his wife has, in real, been worked out from very early in the text (ch. 'Initiation'). In fact, Dase's recurrent psychic juxtapositions of materialism and spiritualism as soon as we are introduced to the character, does lend a clue to his probable attainment of salvation in the end of the novel.

Astride... has the staple features of an Indian language novel of the 1960s: a post-Independence Indian village awakening to the charms of modernity, as the locale; an ordinary family man as the central character, and the little narratives of his rites of passage as content. In addition, there is a four-chapter-long picaresque description of some of the Hindu spiritual places. Yet *Astride...* is a local novel, of a village in Orissa with references to the places and sociology of Orissa. Like most Oriya novels of the 1960s, the protagonist of the novel inhabits a faceless world of poverty and triviality, and the narration is largely linear. Yet unlike its siblings, the novel does not betray an obsession with poverty, does not resent exploitation or an exploiter or talk of caste hierarchies or other social ills per se. The tone is matter-of-fact. The narration is visibly non-categorical and away from moralizing.

The novel is brilliantly structured. Events are not summaries; they take place in dialogues of characters. Almost in a picaresque manner. This is true of even inconsequential events. Since most of the characters and occurrences in the text conduct through the observer's eyes of Sanatan Dase, the authorial distance is never a point of contention. It falters only

very scarcely. Characters are portraits, not sketches; and at least a dozen characters are delineated with elaborate authenticity. The author is for the most part non-judgmental. Characters enjoy the same aesthetic treatment – Brunda Nahak, the crook as well as Satpathy Mahasaya, Dase's alter ego who initiates and helps realize Dase's spiritual odyssey. In the linear unfolding of the plot, there is variation in tone. The chapter 'A Prayer' where Dase is losing his wife and son to an undiagnosed fever is particularly arty, as it does not betray any intimations of mortality; the suspense is broken in the next chapter.

There can be any number of debates on the act of translation. I do not want to get into this. But one point is sure; the translator has gone for short cuts. As an example, 'khaira', the word that has been retained in original Oriya and has necessitated an entry in the glossary, has an English equivalent in 'catechu'. So have several other words. There has been a liberal use of Indian English through the rendering. To translate into English the linear, everyday prose of the original Oriya text with uniformity is a task in itself. The translator has invented his own unruffled approach.

Lipipuspa Nayak

Borough in the Mist by Sandeep Silas, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, Pp.88, Rs.200

Borough in the Mist is a collection of poems by Sandeep Silas who is making his mark as an Indian English poet. This is his second volume with 56 poems which bring forth Sandeep's poetic sensitivities in all their vividness with his own poetic signature.

As the poet says in his preface his poems grew within. "Each taking a different shape, a structure as definite and free as the thought, each speaking of the time it saw and soaked." Not only that. "He seeks to find, he seeks to love, he seeks to create, he seeks to bond."

In "Half a mountain" this is what one finds.

"Lose me not
On the touchstone of purity
For thine eyes alone
I live impure"

He concludes the poem thus:

"Half this mountain glows in sun,
Half harbours shade—
Which half of me is yours
Choose thee with care."

The poet Silas chooses his words with tender care. It is not his intention to dazzle the reader or to blind him with his brilliance. He is one of those honest poets who tries to express, not to impress. The reader feels very comfortable in the company of the poet who in a trance whispers his poetic vibrations with the tenderness of a lover for his beloved.

There are many aspects of life that inspired the poet. Undoubtedly all these poems are spontaneous overflow of emotions because they give a feeling of a natural spring. He asks in "The Drought and Fire":

"Will you ever pause
beneath that tree,
Or your eyes look up in awe?
Will you ever touch that trunk,
shedding its bark,
Or lie under,
and dream?"

In many poems Sandeep Silas comes across like a nature poet, because that is what he basically is. With an observant eye, appreciative mind and joyful heart the poet absorbs and soaks in every beauty of nature not missing out on any nuances as if he were in deep meditation.

Make no mistake. There is a streak of spirituality as well. Reacting to human suffering he seeks divine intervention. In "Red Light Woman" he says:

Son of God has ascended His Heaven,
Full is Earth's Womb of plagues seven
Will ever again be born Lord Christ?
To care for downtrodden, to redeem life's tryst.

"A Small Wish" reconfirms the spiritual yearnings of the poet. A heart filled with devotion, with child-like innocence, the poet seems to lift his hands in prayer saying,

Keep me by the threshold
Of My heavenly abode,
Grant me no more wishes
Save this one alone.

Reading this book is like wandering in the woods, all alone in communion with nature enjoying the simple pleasure of life. In the process you tend to lift your eyes heavenwards devoid of words but filled with ecstasy.

J. Bhagyalakshmi





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Note

The correct spelling of the name of the writer of the short story "Brown Morning" published in IL239 (March-April 2007), is Franck Pavloff. The mistake was noticed only after plates were made. The same is regretted.

Editor

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